

**BOSTON'S URBAN WILDS:
The Persistence of an Idea Over Time**

by

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
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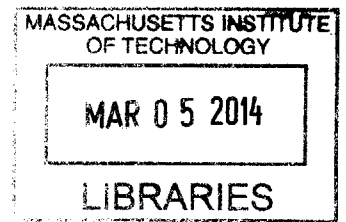
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ABSTRACT

Many city natural areas programs are constricted due to limited resources for the acquisition and management of land. Boston's urban wilds offer an alternative model for the protection of urban open space that focuses on decentralized advocacy and activism rather than on a centralized city program. This thesis analyzes the forty-year history of the urban wilds, investigating how the idea first captured people's attention and how advocates have kept it relevant over time in the face of political, economic, and social changes. The investigation shows that the urban wilds idea was successful due to the extensive support that early visionaries received to develop and implement it, and that the idea persisted beyond this early period of support because advocates were able to maintain the core vision for urban wilds while exercising flexibility and creativity in realizing it. The thesis concludes with recommendations for other cities wishing to create decentralized networks of special places and for Boston's urban wilds advocates as they move into the next period of urban wilds advocacy.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1976 the Boston Redevelopment Agency released a report identifying nearly 2,000 acres of undeveloped land citywide as having significant ecological and social value. The report gave these sites, widely diverse in size, condition, and ownership status, the collective name of “urban wilds” and urged the city to ensure the protection of these special places before they were lost to development. The report was not connected to a larger plan, nor was it connected to further funding. It could have sparked initial interest and then sat on a shelf; instead, it inspired a wide range of actions in both the public and private realm that have continued for over forty years.

The urban wilds study took 143 unconnected sites, many of which were considered worthless, and gave them significance and a collective name and identity. The report, the media coverage that accompanied it, and the designation of “urban wild” helped people to see familiar places in new ways. It gave value to the informal uses happening in these places, such as children’s imaginary play, and to the personal relationships that neighbors might have with them. It explained and celebrated both ecological and social benefits that these undeveloped places offered the city and its residents.

The repercussions of the report continued long after its release. It inspired the creation of a nonprofit that continues to advocate for open space in the city to this day. Advocacy to protect urban wilds in the 1980s led to the formal inclusion of urban wilds in the city’s definition of open space. The designation of a site as an urban wild frequently gave a real tool to neighbors seeking to protect it from development. And the preservation of sites in an undeveloped state offered a flexibility that allowed them to be adapted to different uses in different times.

Boston’s urban wilds are not part of a unified program. Instead they are linked by a *concept* that crosses boundaries of ownership and protected status and that has endured for forty years. What explains the persistence of this concept over so many years? How did the initial report capture people’s imaginations, and how has the

urban wilds idea survived changing social, political and economic tides? The answers to these questions can help shape recommendations for Boston's urban wilds advocates as they make decisions on how, and even whether, to move the concept into the future. The history of the urban wilds idea is also relevant to those in Boston and other cities who are interested in possibilities for conceptually connecting special places in a flexible and decentralized way.

The history of the urban wilds idea can be divided into three phases in which key actions helped keep it relevant to the needs and resources of the times. The first phase started with the beginnings of the idea in 1972 and lasted until 1983. During this period the urban wilds idea was able to flourish due to the focused support it received for its incubation and realization. The second period lasted from 1984 to 1997. With a changing political and social landscape and new maintenance needs for the newly protected urban wilds, urban wilds advocates could no longer depend on a small constituency and focused acquisition of land to sustain the urban wilds idea. During this period the urban wilds concept survived by an expansion outward; this was an era of coalition building and of connecting urban wilds to larger systems. The third phase began in 1998 with the revitalization of the Urban Wilds Initiative in the city and was characterized by a new focus on management of individual sites. The idea of urban wilds was sustained during this period through a focus on community stewardship of individual wilds.

The original concept for the urban wilds was able to take and keep hold because of the focused support it received from local and national government agencies and from a dedicated nonprofit. It persisted because of the flexibility of both the concept and of its advocates to adapt to the needs, opportunities, and challenges of the times, and because there was always an advocate committed to keeping the concept of a citywide network of urban wilds alive. This thesis will examine the ways in which advocates have adjusted in each period to keep the urban wilds vision active and will consider what elements were critical to the sustenance of the urban wilds idea at that time. It will conclude with recommendations both for other cities wishing to start similar programs and for the future of urban wilds advocacy in Boston.

FOCUSED SUPPORT (1972-1983)

The period from 1972 to 1983 saw the urban wilds idea from its conception through the first stage of its implementation. The idea took hold and persisted because it resonated with its times and because its creators had the time, funding, backing and vision to help it realize its potential. Once the report was published, key advocates helped to ensure political support and created a nonprofit to help realize the vision. The initial series of acquisitions was supported by the availability of private and public funds. Advocacy on behalf of urban wilds during this first era was centralized, involved few players, and focused primarily on facilitating the acquisition and preservation of as many wilds as possible.

In the 1970s the term “open space” generally connoted undeveloped land in suburban and rural areas, but people in urban areas were increasingly applying the term to cities as well. Disinvestment in Boston and other cities during the 1950s and 1960s had left parks systems in crisis and neighborhoods littered with vacant lots. This was the era of parks as “open space networks” where recreation could happen anywhere: “in the streets, on a rooftop, at the waterfront, along an abandoned railway line...” (Cranz and Boland 2004). Communities and grassroots organizations in Boston began creating community gardens and other informal gathering spaces on vacant lots. Other activists turned their attention towards ecological conservation of undeveloped urban land.

Although Massachusetts law had given municipalities the right to form conservation commissions in 1957, Boston did not do so until 1970. The general sense was that “a conservation commission in the city seems incompatible with 50-story high buildings. One gets the feeling that planting a conservation commission in a city is like putting a prayer meeting in a burlesque house,” as a 1974 *Boston Globe* article put it (Menzies 1974). Boston’s first conservation commission grew out of research conducted by Eugenie “Genie” Beal on the issue of parks for the League of Women Voters in the 1960s. Beal, who would be a leading advocate for open space in Boston for decades to come, lobbied for a conservation commission and became the Boston

Conservation Commission's first chair in 1970. In many ways, the Boston Conservation Commission was created to fill in where the depleted parks department was not able to take action. Conservation commissions had the right to own land, offering an important tool for the protection and improvement of Boston's open space.

Defining Urban Wilds

Within this context, the idea for a natural areas conservation program for Boston started taking form. Elliot Rhodside, Chief Landscape Architect for the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) from 1972 to 1977, had moved to Boston from Philadelphia and was impressed with Boston's wide range of landscapes and its unique natural and cultural history of parks and open space. In the course of his work he engaged in the ongoing conversations about open space and reviewed development plans. It became clear that there were many naturally significant sites in the city that were privately owned and not publicly accessible, and that several of these already had development proposals in place. The potential, as well as the urgency, for a citywide land conservation program became clear to him, but it felt beyond his capacity as a staff member at the BRA to make something happen (Rhodside 2013).

The 1974 National Endowment for the Arts "City Options" grant, intended to "promote community cooperation in the design of future environments" (Koostra 2000), offered an opportunity for Rhodside to pull his ideas together. Rhodside saw that Boston had "an opportunity to inventory, catalogue, and create a concept for protecting environmentally significant land in the city" and expand its park system (Rhodside 2013). He submitted a proposal with two goals: "to encourage residents and visitors to rethink and rediscover [Boston's] historic urban park system and open space resources, and to provide a catalyst for the city to plan for future URBAN WILDS acquisitions, development, and preservation" (National Endowment for the Arts 1974).

The National Endowment for the Arts awarded \$50,000, the largest grant available, to Rhodeside and the BRA matched the sum. The grant brought money and prestige to the BRA, and Rhodeside was given significant latitude to pursue his vision while working in his position. He had the time, freedom, and funds to hire a team and fully develop and articulate his vision. His first step was to carry out an in-depth study. He and his team began by determining what land to include and exclude in their survey, key decisions that shaped the character of the urban wilds concept moving forward.

The team chose to focus on three types of land: undeveloped land with natural resource value, vacant lots that did not necessarily have natural resource value but that were adjacent to water, and vacant lots that did not necessarily have natural resource value but were adjacent to parkland and could be used to expand those parks (Rhodeside 2013). Sites with “natural resource value” fell into at least one of five categories: “1) sites containing water bodies, 2) sites on hills, 3) sites with prominent geological features, 4) wetlands, and 5) woodland sites” (“Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program” 1976, 35). These places were considered valuable for their beauty, for the window they gave into the city’s geological history, and for their ecological importance.

The urban wilds sites were chosen for their social value as well as their natural value. “These areas have significant amounts of flora, fauna, and/or features of geological importance and have, in addition, scenic, recreational, educational, or esthetic value” (“Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program” 1976, 19). The team intentionally chose not to do a citywide inventory of all vacant land and not to address community gardens. They also did not include the Harbor Islands because the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission was concurrently conducting a study there (Rhodeside 2013).

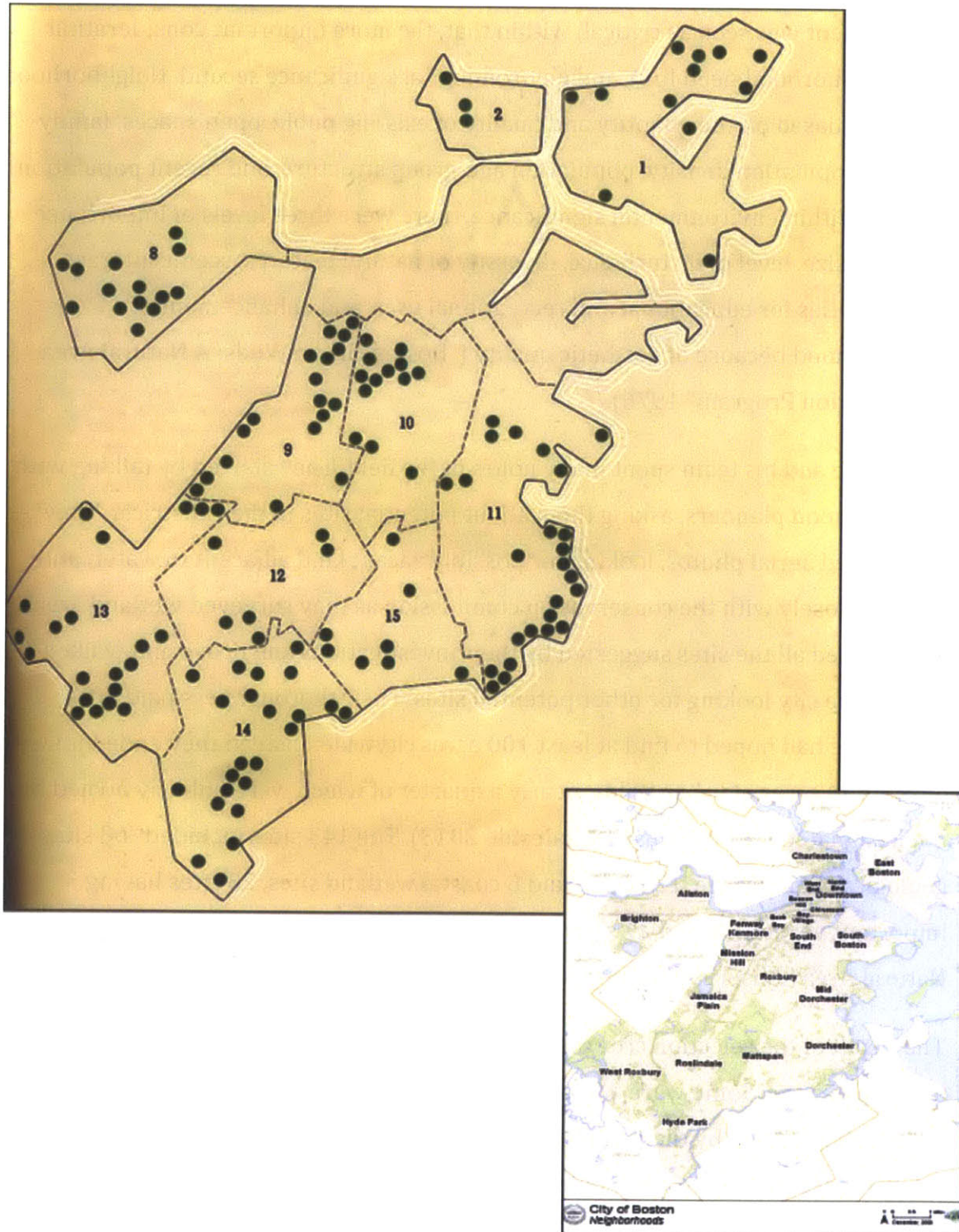
Not every site would be able to be protected immediately; Rhodeside and his team proposed a ranking system that reflects the values promoted by the report. The three criteria proposed for prioritizing efforts at protection and preservation were

environmental significance, the relationship to the open space needs for each neighborhood, and the likelihood of a site's development. The immediate threat of development was seen as critical; within that, the more important consideration was neighborhood need first, and environmental significance second. Neighborhood need was based on the quantity and quality of existing public open spaces, family income, population density, population age-group structure, and recent population change. Within environmental significance, there were three levels of importance based on size, level of disturbance, diversity of natural features, scenic interest, opportunities for educational and recreational uses, and enhancement of neighborhood because of aesthetic quality ("Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program" 1976).

Rhodeside and his team spent many hours in the field. They started by talking with neighborhood planners, asking them about potential sites in their districts. They interpreted aerial photos, looking for possibly vacant land adjacent to water, and worked closely with the conservation commission as they surveyed wetland areas. They visited all the sites suggested by their investigations and drove and walked around the city looking for other potential sites. Their thoroughness paid off—Rhodeside had hoped to find at least 100 acres citywide; instead they ended up with over 2,000 acres of urban wilds, nearly a quarter of which were publicly owned but not designated for public use (Rhodeside 2013). The 143 sites included "68 sites of geological significance, 12 inland and 8 coastal wetland sites, 28 sites having important vegetation and 27 sites along the shoreline" ("Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program" 1976, 19).

The result of the selection criteria was that urban wilds varied dramatically in size and appearance. Some were a fraction of an acre while others exceeded sixty acres. Some were defined by their aesthetics; others were decidedly *not* beautiful and were defined instead by their potential for expanding parks or giving access to the waterfronts. A few examples with images from the era of the original report can offer a sense of the range of landscapes that took on the identity of "urban wild."

Figure 1: Location of Urban Wilds and Boston Neighborhoods



Sources: "Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program" 1976; "Boston: A City of Neighborhoods"

Belle Isle Marsh, East Boston

Belle Isle Marsh was the largest urban wild identified in by the inventory. It encompassed 139 acres of the 350 acres of ecologically significant salt marsh adjacent to Logan Airport in East Boston that now make up a Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation reservation.



Source: "Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program" 1976

Fernald Terrace Urban Wild, Dorchester

Fernald Terrace Urban Wild is a "geologically significant Roxbury Puddingstone rock outcropping" ("Proposed Site: Boston Urban Wilds" 1976, 35) on a residential block in Dorchester. It is the smallest urban wilds, measuring at only 0.06 acres in size.



Source: "Proposed Site: Boston Urban Wilds" 1976

Hancock Woods Urban Wilds

The 47-acre Hancock Woods Urban Wild was considered to be one of the most significant urban wilds sites in the city. It hosted the headwaters of the Sawmill Brook, wetlands, woodlands, outcroppings, hills, and wildlife habitat (“Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program” 1976; Berg 1976). It was also a key piece of the Charles-to-Charles project that aimed to protect a corridor of open space along the Charles River.



Source: “Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program” 1976

Sawmill Brook Urban Wild

This 69-acre urban wild had both environmental and cultural significance. It included freshwater wetlands and tree swamps along Sawmill Brook as well as upland vegetation. It was also adjacent to Brook Farm, home of the mid-19th century Transcendentalist utopian community.



Source: “Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program” 1976

Golden Stairs Urban Wild

This site was described in a Boston Public Facilities Department report on proposed urban wilds sites as: “An historic granite cobblestone alley and stairway contiguous with an empty lot. The lot overlooks Boston Harbor” (“Proposed Site: Boston Urban Wilds” 1976, 55). This rubble-strewn concrete lot is an example of a site whose value lay in its proximity to the water rather than in natural elements on site.



Source: “Proposed Site: Boston Urban Wilds” 1976

Capturing the Imagination

In 1976 the BRA released the report entitled *Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program*. The newspapers hailed the report as “an instructive safari through seldom-appreciated sections of the city,” “an appealing new booklet,” and “glossy and lavishly produced” (Gralla 1979; “Boston’s Urban Wilds” 1977). A drawing of foxes, marshes and skyscrapers in the table of contents directed readers to a cover story on urban wilds (Robb 1977). A poster showing historic and natural areas in the city that could be accessed by transit was released at the same time. It appeared on trains throughout the city and was described in the *Boston Globe*: “The Boston Redevelopment Authority’s Landscape Architecture staff has just put out, of all things, a poster depicting ‘Boston’s Urban Wilds.’ It is so nicely done that you might not want to go away this summer if you put one on your wall” (“Our Urban Wilds” 1976). The poster, these articles informed readers, could be obtained for free at the BRA offices, and the “booklet” was available for \$3.

This is not the standard coverage for a report out of the BRA—but neither was this the standard report. Rhodeside and his team had intentionally set out to make it accessible to a broad audience. They used storytelling and color photographs to convince the reader that places of great natural beauty exists within the city’s boundaries and that every day people have a stake in preserving these special places. Residents are contrasted with developers in the introduction. While developers are said to see urban wilds as “‘undeveloped or vacant lands,’ places still awaiting inevitable bulldozer,” for residents urban wilds instead represent “the memory of where one played as a child, where one’s children play today, and where one looks for beauty, fresh air, and green spaces” (“Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program” 1976, 8).

The urban wild concept was aligned with social movements of the time, but just ahead of the curve. At a time when most natural areas advocacy was aimed at countering suburban sprawl and protecting “untouched” rural open spaces, this program focused specifically within the city. “In the beginning, conservation was thought to be something you did in the suburbs — people felt there was no real relevance to the cities,” Genie Beal wrote twenty-five years later (Marquard 2013). By 1978, the city that had questioned the role of an urban conservation commission was celebrating “a new movement that is gaining impetus and influence: urban conservation. Born from the union of the attempt to revitalize cities and concern for the environment...”(Gralla 1979). Rhodeside, Beal, and their supporters were at the cutting edge of this movement; the idea of urban wilds was radical but also resonated with people living in Boston at the time.

A central element of the urban wilds idea’s ability to capture the imagination was its name. The idea of “urban wilds” was intriguing—it made people stop and think about ideas that were just emerging into the general consciousness. The choice of the word “wild” was significant. On the one hand, it evoked the conservation ethic of the time, evoking positive associations of wilderness “untrammelled by man”(“The Wilderness Act of 1964” 2013). On the other hand, it spoke to the very urban concerns at the time about vacant lots and other land in neighborhoods that is

“uncultivated or uninhabited; hence, waste, desert, desolate” (“Oxford Dictionary” 2013). The urban wilds were both; preserved up until now for their undesirability for development but with the potential to be reshaped into an asset in their wild state. The term was full of both contradiction and potential.

Support for Implementation

As the urban wilds idea began to take form, Genie Beal stepped up to help ensure that it would be implemented. Beal became the Urban Wilds’ biggest advocate; her commitment, political savvy, and personal connections helped turn the concept of an urban wilds network into reality. Early on she got Rhodeside access to the mayor’s office and to the state department of environment and she worked with his team to get land transferred to the conservation commission from other city departments before the study was even completed (Rhodeside 2013). Her enthusiasm was contagious, and others joined into the efforts, including the conservation commission’s one staff member at the time, Lorraine Downey, who later became a member of the commission and then head of the Boston Environment Department (Downey 2013).

The BRA and the conservation commission collaborated on two efforts to transfer property within government began before the report was published. One was the transfer of the 300-acre Belle Isle Marsh from Massport to the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC). The BRA and Boston Conservation Commission worked with East Boston neighbors to help secure the deal (“Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program” 1976, 53). The second undertaking was the transfer of properties in tax arrears from the Boston Real Property Department to the conservation commission. Rhodeside cites the real property department as having been one of the few opponents to the program, and Downey recalls the disconnect between the city wanting to pass the properties on to BNAF but the department having no way to get rid of the back taxes (Rhodeside 2013; Downey 2013). Ultimately, though, through their combined efforts, they were able to protect many

of these properties. The collaboration between the BRA and conservation commission was key to this success.

One of the most important developments in early efforts to acquire and protect urban wilds was the creation of the Boston Natural Areas Fund (BNAF) in 1977. The founding of BNAF was Eugenie Beal's most significant contribution to the nascent urban wilds movement. Beal believed in seeking creative solutions to making things happen. "In suburbia,' says Eugenie, 'a conservation commission can work with their feet (they know their towns), but in the complicated density of a city we need the help of district planners and community groups. We have to mobilize a whole different set of mechanics'" (Menziess 1974). In support of the urban wilds, she "worked behind the scenes with her contacts in Boston, particularly the Boston banks" (Rhodeside 2013), to create the BNAF, first as a revolving fund and then as a nonprofit. The first executive director of the organization was John Blackwell (who would later become Beal's husband). He was well connected, and together he and Beal were able to raise significant funds for the urban wilds.

When Elliot Rhodeside left Boston in 1977, the Boston Conservation Commission and BNAF became the keepers of the urban wilds vision. The two agencies worked closely together in a public-private partnership, using federal and state funding programs, corporate grants, and private funding to acquire and protect urban wilds. According to Massachusetts State Article 97, any land acquired by the city for open space purposes must be maintained for these purposes unless designated otherwise by a two-thirds vote of the Massachusetts legislature. The conservation commission and the parks department were therefore the preferred city owners for the long-term protection of urban wilds and the MDC in the state. However, the commission only had one staff person, no resources beyond its people (Downey 2013); BNAF could make things happen that the conservation commission could not do alone. According to BNAF's *1990 Boston Urban Wilds Report*, during this period "BNAF and the city bought six Wilds, totaling 48 acres, for \$1,033,690, of which more than 80 percent was reimbursed from state and federal conservation programs" ("1990 Boston Urban Wilds Report" 1991).

The conservation commission and BNAF also worked on reaching out to residents, though limited resources and the focus on land acquisition at the time limited the impact of these efforts. One example of both the desire for and potential impact of outreach at the neighborhood scale was a grant-funded youth conservation corps that Lorraine Downey ran one summer. She recalls the impact of that effort:

We went and we put this sign on [the site] that said it was important, that it was a Boston Urban Wild, that it was puddingstone rock. Then they gave an explanation about what puddingstone was: Roxbury conglomerate is the common rock around here, all that stuff. All of a sudden the people on the street thought that their neighborhood was important, just because of this little bit of recognition. That before had just been the rock at the end of the street, but now it had a name, it had a sign on it, and it cost the city nothing, and yet what it did for the people in the immediate area was great. ... The goal was not to improve them; the goal was to raise their recognition and to have the neighborhood see them as an asset, and not just a trash-strewn vacant lot (Downey 2013).

These efforts only touched a few urban wilds sites, though, and Downey feels that they never put enough of a media campaign on the urban wilds. “I think if we had had people or the savvy at the time, I think that would have helped us push it faster quicker, and we might have been able to save more of them” (Downey 2013).

BNAF also sought to engage residents through nature walks and media outreach. Newspapers from the 1970s and 1980s ran advertisements for BNAF-sponsored walks with naturalists in the urban wilds. A 1979 *Globe* article reveals some of BNAF’s early visions for neighborhood involvement in urban wilds: “One of Beale’s [sic] plans is to buy wild land in a neighborhood and to contract with a group in the community to maintain the land. The Fund would give the group money every year through which teenagers would get work and be paid the minimum wage” (Gralla 1979). This plan did not pan out though; the focus of the Boston Natural Areas Fund during this period, as reflected in its name, was on funding and facilitating the acquisition of urban wilds. Widespread community engagement was yet to come.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS (1984-1997)

In the early 1980s, the model of protecting urban wilds through focused acquisition of land began experiencing strain on two fronts. First, the funding climate shifted dramatically as federal funding for conservation land acquisition largely disappeared under President Ronald Reagan and as the nation and state entered a recession. Second, it was becoming increasingly clear that the city's newly acquired urban wilds were in serious need of maintenance. Up until this point urban wild advocacy had required relatively few players and had been effectively centralized in governmental agencies plus BNAF. By the early 1980s, however, with the last of the initial wave of acquisitions complete, it was clear that urban wild advocacy needed a new approach and a broader constituency.

The key to the persistence of the urban wilds idea between 1984 and 1997 was advocates' ability to make connections with other advocacy efforts, to connect urban wilds sites to bigger projects, and to connect the concept of urban wilds with larger visions. By participating in open space and parks reform activism in Boston, activists helped to secure a formal role for urban wilds in the city's open space system and ensured that city-owned wilds would be maintained. Support for the acquisition of urban wilds happened largely through connecting them to existing programs or visions. The Boston Natural Areas Fund took on the role of "keeper of the vision" for urban wilds during this period and acted as a connector between urban wilds, government agencies, communities, and resources.

Urban Wilds as City Open Space

The effects of the nationwide recession were magnified in Massachusetts by the passage of Proposition 2 ½, which capped property taxes statewide in 1980. The Boston parks department's budget was cut in half in 1982 and the already struggling parks system was decimated (Boston Parks and Recreation Department 2002). This crisis helped to galvanize a movement for parks reform. By 1984 the disparate community groups that had been working separately to improve local open spaces began to form a coalition. Foundations and universities also turned their focus to the

issue of parks and open space, as did Boston's new mayor Raymond Flynn, who had run on a pro-neighborhoods and growth control platform. The period of economic growth between 1983 and 1988 known as the "Massachusetts Miracle" provided financial resources to support these efforts.

The Boston Environment Department and BNAF participated actively in all elements of this movement, advocating on behalf of the urban wilds. Because of this advocacy, urban wilds came to be considered a part of the open space system by both the city and nonprofit advocates, giving them a power and a permanence that they could not have had on their own. The name "urban wilds" also took on a new and lasting meaning as a result of these efforts. Whereas it had originally referred to conservation sites that were all unprotected, from this point forward it referred to a specific and unchanging group of sites that were linked by the name "urban wilds" whether or not they were protected.

There were three distinct yet intertwined efforts to reform Boston's parks and open space system between 1984 and 1993. The first was the creation of the Boston GreenSpace Alliance. In 1985, with significant financial support from the Boston Foundation's Poverty Impact Program, leaders from twenty open space advocacy groups and several public agencies formed the nonprofit the Boston GreenSpace Alliance (DiGaetano and Klemanski 1999). The Boston GreenSpace Alliance's vision, according to the 1993 Boston Open Space Plan, was to combine "renewal of the open space system with the need to empower community residents, particularly lower-income residents who had traditionally been underserved by capital improvements, maintenance, and programming" (Boston Parks and Recreation Department 1993, 8). The alliance became a transformational force in the revitalization of Boston's parks system. BNAF, the Boston Conservation Commission, and the Boston Environment Department were all represented in the alliance.

The second piece of the parks reform during this period was based in the city government. Mayor Flynn had created the Mayor's Office of Capital Planning to oversee a capital renewal process for the city. As it became clear that the parks

infrastructure was in crisis and that the parks department was not in a condition to address the problems, the Office of Capital Planning undertook what Charlotte Kahn of Boston Urban Gardeners and the Boston GreenSpace Alliance told the *Boston Globe* was "... probably the most comprehensive plan for open space in the last century" (Boston Parks and Recreation Department 1993; Frisby 1987). In 1987 the city released a two-volume plan entitled *Boston's Open Space: An Urban Open Space Plan*. The focus of this plan was on reforming the Boston Parks and Recreation Department, recommending maintenance and capital improvements and on a developing a broader definition of open space.

The third effort during this period was the convening in 1985 of the Goldberg seminar on parks and open space. The Goldberg seminars, sponsored by the Boston Foundation and Tufts University, were intended to address pressing issues in Boston by bringing people from different sectors together into in-depth conversation and solution finding. The open space seminar was the second of this series. For eighteen months, representatives of government, community groups and business met regularly to explore problems and solutions. The Boston GreenSpace Alliance was actively involved, as were BNAF and the Environment Department. In 1987 the Boston Foundation released the report from the Goldberg Seminar meetings, *The Greening of Boston*, which made policy recommendations to the city.

Because government representatives and nonprofit organizations had been working together in the process, and because a parallel study was underway in the city involving many of the same players, the Boston Foundation report had a significant impact on city policy. "Given the timing of the writing of the two documents and that the participants in both processes were often the same people, these processes fed on each other, nourished each other, and produced community and official consensus that mirrored and reinforced each other" (Boston Parks and Recreation Department 1993, 21). The Boston Foundation report recommended that the city adopt the 1973 Urban Wilds study and develop a plan for the acquisition of urban wilds ("The Greening of Boston: An Action Agenda" 1987). The city's 1987 open space plan included "urban wilds" in its definition of open space and addressed their

status in each neighborhood. Urban wilds had become permanently connected to the concept of open space in Boston, helping to ensure that the concept would continue to thrive.

Urban Wilds Maintenance and The Parks Department

By September of 1988 the *Boston Globe* was celebrating a transformed park system in Boston. “Once the orphan of City Hall, the Parks and Recreation Department has been re-energized to effectively serve the needs of thousands of Bostonians” (The Boston Globe 1988). Genie Beal had originally acquired the urban wilds for the conservation commission, knowing that the then dysfunctional parks department couldn't possibly take them, but the conservation commission was not set up to manage land. Once the parks department was reformed, activists determined that it was time to make a connection between urban wilds and the parks system.

It was pushing and pushing and pushing, pushing, but the mayor knew that that was the right thing to do at that time. It didn't make any sense for [the conservation commission] to be doing it. We didn't have anybody to do it, and why would you want to recreate something? There was some hesitancy in the parks department because they were having such a hard time doing their own. But they got new money in there specifically to try and address that” (Downey 2013).

In 1989 Mayor Flynn shifted the responsibility for city-owned, protected urban wilds from the conservation commission to the parks department, creating the new “Urban Wilds Initiative.” This transfer was critical to securing maintenance for the city's urban wilds.

Urban wilds had always been conceived of as a parks and recreation asset, but the upkeep of conservation land was not in the parks department's mission. Between 1989 and 1997 the conservation commission, environment department, and parks department had to figure out what the maintenance and management of urban wilds would look like. Lorraine Downey recalls the process: “The worry was, how do you teach them how to do it right? If it's a meadow, you don't want them to go in and cut it every two weeks. You wanted to let it grow; maybe you cut it twice a year, or four times a year. So there's a little bit of a process” (Downey 2013). The 1993 open

space plan identified the staff of the conservation commission as the city's primary ecologist, giving that person responsibility "for working closely with the urban wilds planner at the Park and Recreation Department on resource maintenance and protection plans, as well as habitat enrichment plans for selected wilds" (Boston Parks and Recreation Department 1993, 378). "Dealing with one person whose job was to deal with the urban wilds was much better. They understood the importance of it, so they were the liaison with the crews" (Downey 2013).

BNAF as Connector

Genie Beal saw open space improvement as a way to attract suburbanites "who wouldn't be happy without some green around" back in to the city (Genie Beal as quoted in Robb 1977). This contrasted with the focus of the Boston GreenSpace Alliance and the Boston Foundation on using open space improvement to relieve poverty and improve life for those already in the city through. Genie Beal and John Blackwell were Boston Brahmins from Beacon Hill. Their skills and connections had been critical to the initial launch of the urban wilds in Boston, but it was clear that additional skillsets and perspectives would be needed to advocate for urban wilds in changing times.

In 1987, the same year the Boston Foundation report and the city's open space plan were released, BNAF asked Valerie Burns to take the reins as the organization's new director. Genie Beal continued as president of the board. Burns had been a planner in the parks department and more recently had helped found the Boston GreenSpace Alliance and had served as executive director. "John and Genie had a face that was known and a trusted commodity in a lot of communities where they were going to do work. They had the connections with Harvard University, Arnold Arboretum... Valerie had the 'street creds' and the street connections, so that's why I think that the team of them worked fabulously together" (Downey 2013).

In 1988 BNAF began a process of reassessing its tactics and developing "new tools and strategies for its work with the Urban Wilds in light of the diminishing level of resources for ongoing acquisition" ("1990 Boston Urban Wilds Report" 1991, 3). In

an effort to build a larger constituency, the organization increased its education and outreach efforts; it also set out to update the database on the original urban wilds with the current status of each site. In 1990 BNAF released the *1990 Boston Urban Wilds Report*. This report established BNAF as the new “keeper of the vision” of urban wilds and paved the way for a new approach to urban wilds protection.

The *1990 Boston Urban Wilds Report* proclaimed that the urban wilds concept was still relevant and vitally important and that it needed support to cope with changing times. The intent of the report was to “re-introduce the city as a whole to the Wilds and their value” in order to build the constituency that was needed for their protection (“1990 Boston Urban Wilds Report” 1991, 4). The report and the accompanying database were also intended as a tool to help BNAF and others make land-use decisions for urban wilds. By updating the 1976 report BNAF gave value to the original concept of urban wilds. By revisiting the exact same sites and by not adding any other sites BNAF canonized the original report as well, reinforcing the idea that “urban wilds” were very specific and special sites in Boston irrespective of ownership, protected status, or size.

The report has a chapter devoted to “The Urban Wild Idea.” This is significant because it reinforces the concept of urban wilds as a whole, not just individual sites. The report talks about the potential urban wilds offer for creating a network, their value as teaching tools, their role in offering respite, their contribution to the creation of a sense of place to neighborhoods, and their need for stewardship (“1990 Boston Urban Wilds Report” 1991, 11–12). Urban wilds are defined in relationship to the conservation and parks movements of the time but also proclaimed to be unique: they are neither parks (which are designed and sculpted) nor wilderness (for they need human attention). “Like parks, though, Wilds are for people,” says the report, echoing the mantra of the city’s open space movement (“1990 Boston Urban Wilds Report” 1991, 11).

The vision of a citywide network of urban wilds linked across jurisdictions was championed by both city agencies and BNAF at the beginning of this period. As the

number of city-owned urban wilds increased, however, the city's focus shifted to managing its protected urban wilds and, to a lesser extent, targeted acquisition of unprotected wilds. With less involvement from the city and with the release of the 1990 urban wilds report and database, BNAF became the primary keeper of the vision of the urban wilds idea and the hub of all efforts to protect and promote urban wilds.

BNAF also began taking the lead in its partnership with the city, reflecting a nationwide devolution of environmental decision-making and leadership over the past few decades in which leadership shifted from top-down, centralized models to community-based collaboration (Foster 2012; Brownlow 2011; Pincetl and Gearin 2005). This can be seen in the change in relationship between BNAF and the conservation commission after the responsibility for urban wilds transferred to the parks department. The conservation commission continued to accept title and easements for urban wilds but did not actively pursue them. Instead they let BNAF take the lead. "We did what [BNAF] wanted us to do, because they knew it. They were established just to do that and the community gardens. They were spending one hundred percent of their time doing that. ... I'm not going to reinvent the wheel. I didn't have time, we didn't have the manpower. They were the lead, I followed" (Downey 2013).

Nationwide, conservation groups were shifting away from brokering land deals and moving towards building "local policy capacity by providing important services to communities that they might not otherwise have the expertise or resources to secure on their own" (Press and Nakagawa, 150). During the 1990s, BNAF moved beyond its role of partnering with the government and took on the role of linking people and the land, people with each other, and people with governmental resources, all in the interest of increasing opportunities for protection of the urban wilds.

Preservation in Context

Despite the decreased availability of the federal and state funds that had fueled the initial acquisition of urban wilds in the 1970s and 1980s, protection and acquisition of urban wilds continued during this period. The early acquisitions of urban wilds had all been completed by the city, state, and BNAF and had been guided more by opportunities for a sale or transfer than by any larger plan (Burns 2013). In the 1990s private owners and nonprofits as well as public agencies worked to protect urban wilds, and acquisitions were often tied to existing programs or properties and bigger plans. This period was marked by creativity and collaboration in finding ways to protect urban wilds.

The original urban wilds survey had prioritized sites that were adjacent to existing public parks and open spaces; this foresight bore fruit in the 1990s when two urban wilds, Hancock Woods and Bussey Brook, were protected because of their connection to adjoining sites. Hancock Woods was a key piece of the Charles-to-Charles Corridor, one of Genie Beal's visions in partnership with the Brookline Conservation Commission in the early 1970s. Conservation advocates and neighbors had been seeking to protect Hancock Woods since before the release of the 1976 urban wilds report. (See, for example, the report written for the conservation commission by an intern for Mass Audubon in 1976 (Berg 1976)). In 1996 BNAF and the Hancock Woods Neighborhood Association helped ensure its acquisition by the Metropolitan District Commission ("BNAN Urban Wild Survey" 2013).

The Bussey Brook Urban Wild was important because it provided a key link between the Arnold Arboretum and public transportation. Arnold Arboretum is owned by Harvard and maintained in partnership with the city through a mutual indenture dating back to 1882 ("Our History" 2013). In 1997 Bussey Brook Urban Wild was added to the thousand-year lease through the advocacy of Genie Beal and John Blackwell on behalf of the Arboretum Park Conservancy ("BNAN Urban Wild Survey" 2013).

Another urban wild acquired in connection to a larger vision was the Boston State Hospital Urban Wild, purchased by the Massachusetts Audubon Society in 1996. Mass Audubon had been involved with urban wilds over the years through activities such as leading BNAF nature walks and advising on the construction of wetlands boardwalks. Supported by the city government and open space advocates, the organization brokered a deal with the state to purchase 65 acres of the old Boston State Hospital in Mattapan, including a 34-acre urban wild, to be used as a sanctuary and educational nature center.

The most elaborate effort to protect urban wilds by linking them to bigger systems was BNAF's Greenways to the Boston Harbor project. In 1989 BNAF instituted a program of interpretive walks in urban wilds throughout the city with a naturalist provided by Mass Audubon. These walks proved extremely popular and functioned to bring a new visibility to urban wilds; BNAF began to think about the programming potential of urban wilds as a way to increase their visibility and stewardship. Greenways were a popular concept nationwide at the time, and connections between green spaces was a big topic in Boston; in 1992 BNAF decided to use the greenways model as a way to connect more than twenty urban wilds with abandoned industrial land and existing parks in order to spur the protection of urban wilds and to increase their use ("Learn about BNAN" 2013; Burns 2013).

The Greenways to Boston Harbor program marked a significant shift in focus for BNAF and directly addressed the two challenges of this period—how to protect urban wilds with the disappearance of acquisition funds and how to increase public engagement with and stewardship of the urban wilds. The opportunity-based acquisitions of the 1970s and 1980s had resulted in a patchwork of disconnected and diverse urban wilds across the city; greenways offered a way to connect urban wilds to each other as well as to connect people to urban wilds (Burns 2013). BNAF's approach to the greenways projects exemplified its new commitment to supporting community initiative and to seeking creative funding for the protection of urban wilds.

BNAF targeted two unused railroad lines for the greenways. One was along the Neponset River where there were 17 urban wilds sites and the potential of realizing Charles Eliot's vision of a pathway between the Blue Hills Reserve and the Boston Harbor. The state Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) owned the banks of the river and some key parcels along it, including two key (and contaminated) urban wilds sites it had acquired and land banked in the previous decade. When a neighbor heard that Conrail was going to sell the railroad line to abutters he contacted BNAF. BNAF worked with neighbors and the state senator to facilitate a sale of the land to MDC instead, thus securing the potential for the greenway to take shape (Burns 2013).

BNAF had gathered support from neighbors for a greenway and the MDC supported the idea as long as BNAF took the lead. The key to actually turning the vision into reality, however, was the awarding of a major multi-year grant in 1994 by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund for BNAF to carry out the greenways project in partnership with the Trust for Public Land. This grant reflected a new philosophy of "strategic giving" that was developing that included promoting conservation partnerships, grant leveraging, and capacity building of NGOs (Press and Nakagawa, 151).

The funds enabled BNAF to add staff, begin the project, and attract additional support (Burns 2013). The MDC and the city acquired several urban wilds as part of the Neponset and East Boston Greenway projects during this period. In 1995 the Trust for Public Land pledged \$2 million to match city money for the purchase of open space, with \$1 million going to acquire 10 acres of land along the Neponset Greenway (Palmer Jr. 1995), and in 1998 the Boston Parks and Recreation Department made the first use of a new source of funding, the Mayor's Open Space Acquisition Fund, to acquire the first section of the East Boston Greenway (Boston Parks and Recreation Department 2008, 7.6.2-5).

BNAF and the Trust for Public Land acted as coordinators and connectors. BNAF helped to found "Greenways Councils" of neighbors to coordinate the project and

helped to direct resources to these groups. The greenways, which are still under construction as of 2013, are being built with public funds entirely; private funds have been used for programming and coordinating support only. The project will take decades to complete. BNAF sees its role as holding on to the long term vision in a way that would be difficult for a state agency operating on elected terms to do (Burns 2013).

One way in which BNAF worked to help people to understand the vision of the completed greenways was through the founding of the Youth Conservation Corps in 1994. The conservation corps was a response to a request by community members along the future East Boston Greenway to get youth involved in the project. The youth helped clean up the railroad corridors each summer. Once they were done for the summer, BNAF would lead exploratory walks along the corridors to help people in the communities better envision the future greenways (Cook 2013). The Youth Conservation Corps was a good fit for BNAF's efforts to facilitate engagement, education and stewardship with the urban wilds, and the presence of the youth increased the visibility of urban wilds in the communities they served.

The greenway project was able to inspire the city, state, neighbors and funders to prioritize protecting the urban wilds along its path by connecting them to a larger vision. The investment of these multiple parties in its success helped ensure the feasibility and relevance of the project and the ongoing use and care of the urban wilds that were a part of it. The undertaking was so successful, however, that it quickly transcended its origins in protecting urban wilds. The greenways project became a program in its own right, joining urban wilds and gardens as a central spoke of BNAF's mission. Much of the energy that had gone to protecting urban wilds shifted to facilitating this multi-generational project. The continued support of the urban wilds vision was going to need to find another focus. In 1998 the Boston Parks and Recreation Department stepped forward and urban wilds advocacy entered a new period.

SITE-BASED STEWARDSHIP (1998-2013)

Between 1998 and 2013 many of the same challenges faced urban wilds advocacy—ensuring maintenance of the sites, building a constituency and keeping the vision of the citywide concept of urban wilds alive and current. However, the approach to addressing these challenges changed. Rather than pursue citywide coalition building and protection of urban wilds through linking them to larger systems, urban wilds advocates turned their attention to strengthening the connections between individual urban wilds and their neighborhoods.

Both the Boston Parks and Recreation Department and The Boston Natural Areas Fund (which became the Boston Natural Areas Network, or BNAN, in 2002) made structural changes during this period to their organizations in order to address changing societal values, organizational philosophies, and the physical needs of urban wilds sites. With many urban wilds sites protected, advocates focused more on the management, restoration, and design of city-owned urban wilds. Rather than pursuing a uniform vision of what an urban wild should look like, they encouraged interventions that responded to the needs and opportunities of individual sites. They prioritized neighborhood engagement with urban wilds and sought to cultivate and support Friends groups to serve as stewards and advocates for local urban wilds.

This focus on local stewardship mirrored trends in the larger society. In 2000 Richard Worrel and Michael Appleby defined stewardship as “the responsible use (including conservation) of natural resources in a way that takes full and balanced account of the interests of society, future generations, and other species, as well as of private needs, and accepts significant answerability to society” (Worrell and Appleby 2000). In cities, stewardship typically referred to the participatory conservation of urban natural resources by local communities (Chanse and Yang 2005; Mazingo 1997; Svendsen and Campbell 2008).

The increased interest in urban stewardship in this period was linked to the adaptation of ecological restoration practices to cities. In 1995 the Society for

Ecological Restoration International's definition of restoration was "the process of renewing and maintaining ecosystem health;" by 2005 it had changed to "the process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed" (Hall 2005, 202). Cities had become viable places to study, protect, and even create ecosystems. Previously open spaces in cities had been considered too small and fragmented to support ecological systems. The idea that people could help maintain habitat in small spaces opened the possibility that urban wilds could be managed for wildlife and habitat.

The philosophy of stewardship in cities was about more than taking care of the land, though. Stewardship was also seen as a way of taking care of human needs for connection to place and each other. Stewardship was central to the new model for city parks that was emerging at the turn of the century:

Contemporary park advocates believe that expanded citizen involvement in the stewardship of urban parks and urban farming can generate a sense of belonging and community. Similarly they claim that expanded awareness of and contact with ecological processes in the urban environment increase one's sense of connection to the local and regional environment. (Cranz and Boland 2004, 114)

In response to and in support of growing interest in stewardship, the Urban Wilds Initiative and BNAF increasingly took on the role of facilitators and conveners, helping to connect communities with the resources they needed to enact change in local urban wilds.

City Reinvestment in the Urban Wilds

In 1998 the parks department hired a naturalist to coordinate the Urban Wilds Initiative. This was the first full time staffing the program had had, and was critical to the persistence of the urban wilds idea. It helped the city to finally realize the vision of ecological management first expressed in the 1993 Open Space Plan and to move beyond rudimentary maintenance of the sites. It also committed city resources to urban wilds acquisitions and to community engagement with urban wilds sites. Although the primary focus was initially on city-owned urban wilds, the

existence of a staff position dedicated to urban wilds ultimately revived the concept of urban wilds as a whole in the city government.

The new Urban Wilds Initiative position was focused on the protection, restoration and maintenance of urban wilds. Most of the land protection during this period was via interdepartmental transfers. Restoration work focused on habitat restoration and on creating opportunities for public access. The maintenance of the forty urban wilds managed by the city depended on the assistance of neighborhood groups and other volunteers (Sutton 2013a). Stewardship was central to the revitalized Urban Wilds Initiative:

Public access and use is a major mission of this initiative. With a strong focus on ecological restoration and stewardship, the revitalized Urban Wilds Initiative seeks to restore and enhance biological diversity and ecological values, such as flood storage, water filtration, wildlife habitat, and control of air quality, while accommodating and enhancing passive recreation and environmental education” (Boston Parks and Recreation Department 2002, 423).

This focus on stewardship fit philosophically into the parks department’s role of serving residents and also provided a means for realizing maintenance and management goals.

The position of urban wilds coordinator was held and shaped by one person, Paul Sutton, from 2002 onwards. This continuity was an important element of the success of a position that was otherwise underfunded and overextended. A number of people involved with urban wilds have remarked on Sutton’s devotion to creatively sustaining urban wilds and on his skills in connecting people with resources in order to support the restoration and maintenance of urban wilds. Under Paul Sutton, the Urban Wilds Initiative focused in the first half of the 2000s primarily on site restoration and protection, including the remediation of brownfields and the protection of urban wilds sites. In the latter part of the decade its focus shifted more to supporting Friends groups connected to individual urban wilds sites (Sutton 2013b).

Sutton also worked to promote the concept of urban wilds as a whole. While the 2002 open space plan focused on the Urban Wilds Initiative's role in maintaining city-owned urban wilds and selectively acquiring additional wilds as appropriate, by 2008 the goals for the Urban Wilds Initiative had expanded to include supporting the protection and stewardship of *all* urban wilds, not just those that were managed by the city. The 2008 open space plan recommended that the city (1) continue to seek acquisition of high priority, privately-owned urban wilds and natural areas, and (2) "Work with private landowners, other public natural area management agencies, such as the MDC, and other concerned parties such as Earthworks, Boston Natural Areas Network, and neighborhood-based groups in facilitating ecologically-based land management activities for all natural areas in Boston" (Boston Parks and Recreation Department 2008, 7.1.3-11).

The Urban Wilds Initiative continued to struggle with funding and recognition within the parks department (Desimini, Sutton, and Rhodeside 2013; Kinzer 2006). Nonetheless, by hiring a staff person to manage and advocate for the urban wilds the parks department took an important step in ensuring the continuation of the concept of urban wilds. The urban wilds concept originated in the city government and the city is the one governmental body that uses the term "urban wild." Having a booster for urban wilds within the city brought the city back as an advocate for the concept of urban wilds.

BNAN as Keeper of the Information

In 2000 the Boston Natural Area Fund drafted its first mission statement and in 2002 the organization changed its name to the Boston Natural Areas Network (BNAN). Both changes reflected the organization's deepening commitment to supporting community initiative. The final sentence of the mission statement reads, "In all of its endeavors, BNAN is guided by local citizens advocating for their open spaces and assisting them to preserve and shape their communities" ("Learn about BNAN" 2013).

BNAN by this time was largely focused on supporting community gardens and pursuing the greenways projects. Community gardens by definition engaged local citizens and the two greenways had strong citizen councils acting as guides. It was less clear what “guidance by local citizens” would look like for urban wilds; during this period BNAN sought new ways to match its urban wilds advocacy with its mission.

Between 1998 and 2006, BNAN continued its work on greenways and gardens, supporting urban wilds advocacy as issues arose. The first major step towards supporting urban wilds in this period was in 2006 when the organization decided to complete a third urban wilds survey. The intent was to update the technology and to update the database to reflect the land transfers pursued by the parks department in the 2000s (Burns 2013). With a DCR Urban and Community Forestry Challenge Grant and a donation of GIS software, BNAN staff revisited each urban wild site, assessed its condition, researched its history, and updated maps with accurate boundaries.

In 2008 BNAN posted the results on its website as the *Urban Wilds E-Report*. The data presented on the website is extensive, with GIS maps, photos, and descriptions of each site. However, there is little in the way of analysis and recommendations. This stands in contrast to the previous two surveys and reports, which had served as platforms for presenting policy and programming recommendations. Faced with finite resources and the growing importance of the greenways project to the organization, BNAN made the choice to get the data accurate and to get the report, already two years in the making, online rather than to focus on analysis. “More than anything else we wanted to capture the information and have it there for others to work with” (Burns 2013). This choice reflects a shift in how BNAN was defining itself in relation to the urban wilds. Having previously been the keeper of the overall *vision* for urban wilds, BNAN saw itself instead as “the keeper of all of the information about wilds” (Burns 2013) so that others could more easily realize the vision.

That same year BNAN took steps to support neighborhood urban wilds advocates with staffing as well as by creating a stewardship coordinator position. The position was initially created for community gardens, but BNAN decided to also include urban wilds in the position in order “to see exactly what the volunteer involvement might be in urban wilds” (Burns 2013). The stewardship coordinator took on the job of cultivating, supporting, and adding capacity to programs around planting and stewardship and working to increase the visibility of urban wilds citywide (Cook 2013). This position continued until March of 2013 when the coordinator left BNAN and the garden portion of the job was absorbed into another position.

A third project BNAN took on in 2008 as part of its efforts to encourage guidance by citizens was the creation of an urban wilds council. This was a model that the organization had used for both the greenways and the gardens to support leadership by community members. BNAN staffed these citizen councils, taking on jobs such as scheduling meetings, coordinating people, and bringing in representatives from public agencies and elected officials when needed. The hope was that an urban wilds council would build the capacity of urban wild steward groups and would create a stronger citywide vision for the urban wilds from this grassroots base (Cook 2013).

Translating the model to the urban wilds proved to be a challenge. It was difficult to get people who were already busy stewarding their own urban wild to give time to a larger organization as well. BNAN ultimately hosted a periodic speaker series that was well attended, but the Urban Wilds Council stopped meeting formally (Cook 2013; Burns 2013). The group remains as an important resource that can be mobilized in case of a crisis or opportunity (Burns 2013; Sutton 2013a), but it does not function to promote a citywide vision of urban wilds.

Flexibility in Shaping the Land

By 1998 many urban wilds had been protected from development and were receiving basic maintenance. The parks department, community groups, and BNAN shifted their focus to shaping the land through management, restoration, and design.

They prioritized making site-specific decisions based on available opportunities and the needs of the sites and surrounding communities. Several contaminated former industrial sites received remediation during this time, some urban wilds sites were landscaped as parks, others were renovated with benches and walkways, and still others hosted habitat restoration projects. The flexibility in the shaping of urban wilds made it harder to define what an urban wild was as they took widely different forms. However, it also helped address the varied needs of the city's scattered sites, resonated with the goals of the parks department and BNAN, and helped communities to find relevance in their local urban wilds.

One important opportunity for shaping specific urban wilds sites that emerged in the 2000s was brownfields remediation. While all of the 1976 urban wilds sites had had some former human use, some of them, especially along the waterfront, were actually contaminated with hazardous materials, sharply limiting their access, usability, aesthetics, and habitat. Condor Street Urban Wild, one of the first urban wilds acquired by the city after the release of the report, was fenced off for twenty years due to contamination. Schoolboy Track Urban Wild, former site of the Hallet Street Dump, had been essentially land banked for decades under MDC/ DCR ownership.

In 1998 Massachusetts passed the Massachusetts Brownfields Act establishing the Brownfields Advisory Group and creating financial incentives and relief from liability to encourage the cleanup and reuse of potentially contaminated former industrial sites known as brownfields. Federal and state remediation efforts during this time focused heavily on supporting collaboration between local communities, nonprofits, and government agencies; brownfields cleanup offered opportunities to get funding for remediation and to build partnerships. Between 2000 and 2006 five contaminated urban wilds were remediated and restored into useable spaces. Three of the wilds were part of the Neponset Greenway, one was city-owned land adjacent to Belle Isle Marsh, and one, Condor Street, was on the edge of highly industrial Chelsea Creek in East Boston, one of the few places where there was the potential for access to the riverfront.

Several of these former brownfields, along with a few other urban wilds sites, were restored as manicured parks, raising questions of what an urban wild is and what it should look like. Urban wilds advocates' answers to these questions have shifted over time. The 1976 report highlights the importance of their "relatively undisturbed natural features" ("Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program" 1976, 38) but does not address management of the wilds. BNAN's 1990 urban wilds report emphasizes a distinction between parks and urban wilds, saying that urban wilds are "designed and sculpted" by natural processes instead of by people ("1990 Boston Urban Wilds Report" 1991, 10).

By 2013 BNAN allowed more space for human sculpting, reflecting the organization's priority on ensuring local relevance and use of urban wilds. BNAN president Valerie Burns considers the original designation of urban wilds to have been, in some cases, a form of land banking to keep land open for potential future parkland needs. While acknowledging that some "wildness" is removed with the transition to a park, she argues that this wildness is frequently growing on top of trash; a park that is maintained and well-used can help ensure that that land is accessible to the public and tended to (Burns 2013).

In her thesis on urban wilds, Kirsten Kinzer notes that neighbors of urban wilds on former brownfield sites have generally urged the development into more designed parks while neighbors who have fought to protect an urban wild from development are more likely to want it to remain wild once protected. She also points out that it is especially important that smaller sites, where the ecological value is not readily apparent, be compatible with what neighbors enjoy in order to withstand pressures for other uses of the land (Kinzer 2006).

Condor Street Urban Wild is an example of a former brownfield site that is highly manicured (Kinzer 2006). However, in addition to a landscaped park the site also hosts an unmown meadow, a beach, and wetlands that were restored as a part of the community-based reclamation of this once-fenced-off wild. This site is heavily used by neighbors as well as by local nonprofits for environmental programs. The

flexibility in interpreting the urban wilds designation meant that Condor Street Urban Wild was able to preserve ecological diversity in a way that was also meaningful and inviting to the surrounding community.

Neighborhood Management of the Urban Wilds

The parks department and BNAN also sought to make urban wilds relevant to communities and to address site needs through the cultivation and support of Friends groups. Groups of citizens that work to support specific parks or open spaces have always existed, but neighborhood Friends groups blossomed in the late 1980s and 1990s as parks departments nationwide sought to reinvent themselves with less funding. All of Boston's open space plans since 1987 have encouraged the formation of partnerships between neighbors and local parks. The first urban wilds Friends group was the Friends of Belle Isle Marsh, which formed in 1982 to support the newly preserved salt marsh in East Boston. The majority of urban wilds Friends groups, however, did not form until the second half of the 2000s. Prior to that, most neighborhood urban wilds advocacy had been aimed at preserving urban wilds from development rather than at supporting their upkeep. The growth in Friends groups in the 2000s came from two directions—neighborhood groups took the initiative to improve their protected local urban wilds at the same time as the parks department and BNAN restructured their own programs in order to encourage and support local efforts.

The Urban Wilds Initiative focused on cultivating Friends groups and working with them on the maintenance, renovation and restoration of their local urban wilds. Occasionally groups interested in supporting an urban wild would contact coordinator Paul Sutton directly, but more often he worked to help form the groups, attracting attention to sites through programming or through small renovations or increased maintenance (Sutton 2013b). The BNAN stewardship coordinator collaborated with Sutton. BNAN's contribution was often in the form of funding, planning and outreach efforts to events and programs, such as nature walks or rock

climbing, that could foster a sense of community around a particular urban wild and increase the visibility of urban wilds citywide (Cook 2013).

Although the potential for constituency building and maintenance offered by Friends groups was important to the persistence of the urban wilds idea during this period, supporting Friends groups also presented challenges. Sutton cites “wavering engagement of a weak collection of neighborhood-based friends groups” as one of the key external challenges that the Urban Wilds Initiative faces (Desimini, Sutton, and Rhodeside 2013). Grassroots organizing is often sparked by crisis (Carmin 1999) and ongoing site stewardship requires networking and capacity-building (Svendsen and Campbell 2008). Although BNAN and the Urban Wilds sought to offer this support, when the initial incentive for a group’s formation was protecting an urban wild from development, keeping the group going once the immediate threat had passed often proved a challenge (Sutton 2013a).

Another difficulty with a heavy focus on Friends groups is its potential to channel resources to wealthier communities. Communities with the most income, social capital and time for volunteering are also the most likely to be able to form and sustain Friends groups; a focus of resources on supporting these groups can result in an inequitable distribution of these resources (Mozingo 1997; Brownlow 2011). Sutton’s experience supports this. He finds that urban wilds Friends groups in Boston are most likely to last in the financially stable communities with high home ownership and education levels where there is already a “pretty good buy-in to natural areas” (Sutton 2013a). Sutton and BNAN both seek to address these inequities by reaching out to lower income communities through programming and Sutton works to keep sites where there is no Friends group safe and clean (Sutton 2013b). Still, working with Friends group is a significant focus of the work of both BNAN and the Urban Wilds Initiative in relation to the urban wilds.

In spite of the challenges, urban wilds advocates’ priority on local participation and flexibility has been important to the persistence of the urban wilds concept. Through its focus on connecting the urban wilds with their communities, Boston has

avoided what Paul Gobster refers to as the “museumification” of nature, where restored habitats in natural areas are considered off-limits and in need of protection from human impacts. This kind of preciousness can limit the scope of what constitutes appropriate activities in the natural area, thereby reducing the opportunities for a wide range of people to find personal relevance in using the space (Gobster 2007).

In some ways it could be argued that the original concept of a network of urban wilds based in the neighborhoods was largely realized during this period. However, the focus on local sites and communities during this period has in many ways excluded strong leadership for a citywide vision. Finding a way to integrate these two needs will likely frame the next period of urban wilds advocacy if the concept of urban wilds is to persist into the future.

CONCLUSION

Forty years ago Elliot Rhoadside found inspiration in the legacy of Eliot and Olmsted. Today, Boston’s urban wilds have themselves become a part of the city’s distinctive open space heritage. Their history can serve as inspiration for new creativity and innovation in Boston and beyond; it can also guide urban wilds advocates as they work with urban wilds moving into the future.

Recommendations for New Programs

The history of Boston’s urban wilds would be impossible to duplicate, and it never could have been planned. What it can offer to people in other cities who are intrigued with the idea of a diffuse network of special places is an opportunity to reflect backwards over forty years. Out of this history we can pull some lessons and propose some recommendations for those who wish to start something new, either in Boston or elsewhere.

Prioritize a thorough inventory with clear parameters

The 1987 open space plan defined an urban wild as “An undeveloped site whose scale, ecological, and scenic significance can vary considerably, from an area which

has retained considerable natural character to one that is severely disturbed by human intervention, and from a fraction of an acre to over 100 acres” (*Boston’s Open Space: An Urban Open Space Plan* 1987). Urban wilds can be frustrating to define due to this apparent lack of cohesiveness. But what may appear haphazard was actually very intentionally laying the foundation to enable a certain range of future possibilities. Only very specific “severely disturbed” sites were included in the inventory: those adjacent to the water or other parks. This choice to preserve even contaminated sites if they were adjacent to water, for example, is what later enabled the Greenways to the Boston Harbor project.

The decisions made about what to include and exclude in the initial inventory will give the network its identity. The parameters of the inventory should reflect the interests, opportunities, and character of the time and location. In Boston, Elliot Rhodeside sought to highlight the local prominence of geological features and bodies of water. Another city will have different criteria. At the time of the urban wilds inventory, Boston had many parts of town that were not heavily developed, and the inventory focused on preserving these areas. As a result, the more densely built core neighborhoods do not have any urban wilds. Today, a built-out city with a tight real estate market might instead choose to focus on finding or creating “wilds” in smaller and perhaps undevelopable nooks and crannies.

Support creativity

Rhodeside and his team set out expecting to find one hundred acres of land (Rhodeside 2013); after an exhaustive inventory they instead identified two thousand acres that fit their criteria for urban wilds. Had the urban wilds network only consisted of one hundred acres, it would probably not have had the impact that it ultimately had. The extensiveness of this inventory was made possible because Rhodeside had the funding and institutional support to hire a team, to take the time to be thorough, and to spend time out in the field as well as poring over maps, photos, and city records.

The urban wilds project came about in a time when federal and state funding was widely available; the early successes in realizing the vision are intimately intertwined with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts and funds for land conservation. This cannot be repeated today, but cities can strive to replicate the conditions that nurtured the early visioning and implementation. Grants and fellowships can help provide funds and staffing, and supervisors and department heads can make an effort to allow the autonomy that freed Rhodeside to pursue his vision.

The Greenways to the Boston Harbor project is one example of a creative approach to attracting funding after the initial funds for acquisition dried up. The use of brownfields remediation funding to spur habitat restoration projects is another. The Urban Wilds Initiative and BNAN also encouraged creativity by involving communities in the design and renovation of local urban wilds and by helping to link these communities with resources.

Strive to capture the public's imagination

The urban wilds idea caught people's attention and engaged their imagination. The idea spoke to the times—urban conservation was a new concept that seemed like an oxymoron to many people. It was intriguing and exciting to imagine that conservation had a place in the city. One piece of capturing the imagination is finding a lens that speaks to today's cutting edge issues.

Once the original idea had taken form, Elliot Rhodeside and Genie Beal were very intentional in their efforts to make it known. The name, the report, the map, the poster, the media coverage, and the guided walks in the urban wilds were all an important part of what helped the urban wilds concept take hold and persevere. The name of "urban wilds" spoke directly to the tension and intrigue associated with urban conservation. The report was full of stories and photos to convince people of the urban wilds' value and beauty. The map placed the urban wilds permanently in the city, and the poster and walks invited people to visit them. The media coverage let people know that all of this existed. A project today will employ different

technology for its maps, posters, and outreach, but visuals and opportunities to engage personally with the sites are important elements in helping people to place themselves in the vision.

Placing people in the vision of urban wilds has continued in many ways over the past forty years. When the Greenways to the Boston Harbor project was first envisioned, BNAF's efforts to clean the urban wilds and railway right of ways and then take neighbors on walks in them was critical to helping neighbors to support and get excited about the new vision. BNAN continues this type of public engagement today with programs such as full moon hikes, bicycle tours of urban wilds and canoeing trips on the Neponset River. The simple signage that the conservation commission put up in urban wilds in the 1970s is another example of a way in which advocates have effectively engaged the public's imagination.

Involve both public and private partners from the beginning

Part of the urban wilds concept's strength is that it has deep roots in two sectors. Its origins were in the city government, but within a year the Boston Natural Areas Fund had been founded specifically to help make the concept a reality. Having roots in each sector has made a wider range of tools available to support the urban wilds. Additionally, when the commitment on one side has lessened, the other side has often been able to take up the slack.

The urban wilds concept's origins in the city gave it clout and authority that would have been hard to come by if it had been started by a nonprofit. The city has acknowledged a responsibility for the vision on numerous occasions over the years through zoning provisions, consideration of the urban wilds designation in assessing development plans, including all urban wilds in the city's open space plan, and creating a program for the urban wilds in the parks department.

At the same time, without the focused advocacy of BNAF/ BNAN, it is questionable whether the vision would have made it very far past conception. BNAF filled in where there was no plan or funding for realizing the concept and acted decisively in partnership with the city to protect urban wilds. As the city got more focused on

managing the urban wilds it had acquired, BNAF continued to keep track of the broader vision. It worked with the state to acquire urban wilds for the Greenways to Boston Harbor project, and has always helped advocate for urban wilds that were threatened by development.

While it may not be possible to start a whole new nonprofit in tandem with a new program, ownership and investment by an existing nonprofit from the start can also go a long way towards the long-term persistence of a vision. One of the reasons the connection between BNAF and the city was so strong was that Genie Beal, director of the conservation commission and later of the environment department, helped found BNAF. Finding ways to form and nurture connections between the individuals in the government and in the nonprofit can help attain that level of commitment.

Encourage protection by multiple parties in multiple ways

Instead of proposing a traditional program for targeted acquisition of urban wilds by the city, the 1976 report urged the city to consider a variety of ways to protect the land. Some sites would fit the DCR's mission better than the city's. Other sites might be prohibitively expensive or not for sale and were good candidates for a conservation easement. By encouraging multiple parties to take responsibility for the protection of land, more land can be preserved and more resources made available for its management.

The initial focus on protection from development was critical to the success of urban wilds protection over the years. At the most fundamental level, it ensured that there would be urban wilds to be managed. That early window of opportunity for acquisitions never again appeared in quite the same way; it was the right time to focus on preserving the land. Additionally, removing the land from the marketplace without a specific plan for its management enabled future advocates to take advantage of unforeseen needs and opportunities as they arose, such as brownfields remediation funds and greenways linking urban wilds. This has resulted in a richer range of what it means to be an urban wild, and has made it more likely that urban wilds will resonate in different neighborhoods and in different times.

Recommendations for Boston

Boston's urban wilds are at a crossroads. Many of the original urban wilds sites have been protected, several have been lost to development, and some are still wild but unprotected. Most are managed in some way, and advocacy has largely shifted to the neighborhood-scale. Urban wilds advocates need to decide how and whether to move their advocacy into a new period; lessons from previous periods can inform recommendations for moving forward.

Continue to promote a citywide vision for urban wilds

While the original urban wilds project did set out to preserve the urban wilds, its significance extends beyond the successful protection of sites. It introduced a concept and gave a scattered collection of disparate sites a name and identity. It helped people to see value and potential that they might not otherwise have seen and served as a catalyst for action in both the public and private realms. Urban wilds sites have continued to bear the name upon their protection; the name now carries historical significance as well as the continued potential for future innovation. If anything, the possibility for realizing the potential of the urban wilds is greater now that many of them are protected.

Many of the pieces are in place for making the transition to a new way of sustaining the urban wilds idea. BNAN is grappling with the role urban wilds will play in its programs and will be turning its attention to this question in its 2014 strategic planning process (Burns 2013). Paul Sutton of the Urban Wilds Initiative, while primarily focused on protecting and managing city-owned urban wilds, keeps his eyes on the status of sites that are not protected (Sutton 2013b) as well. Recently Sutton, Elliot Rhodeside, and Harvard University professor Jill Desimini, joined forces to present a session on the past, present and future of Boston's urban wilds at the 2013 American Society of Landscape Architects conference in Boston. This coming together of key players in the past, present, and future of urban wilds will undoubtedly help to support and inspire Sutton and other advocates' efforts to shape the next period of the urban wilds idea.

Consider elements of the vision beyond protection of the land

Traditionally BNAN has focused on the protection of the urban wilds sites by any means. It worked hard to get the urban wilds protected and, later, to make sure they would be managed; whether they continued to be seen as urban wilds afterward was less of a focus. The Greenways to Boston Harbor project offers an example of this. It was an innovative way of ensuring the protection of a number of urban wilds sites, but ultimately the urban wilds within it lost their identity to the greater greenway project. More recently, BNAN has sought to support protection of the small, scattered sites that are difficult for the city to maintain through support of Friends groups and site stewardship.

In seeking to find new relevance for the urban wilds idea, it may be time to look beyond protection for other ways to realize the potential of urban wilds as a citywide network. The importance of urban wilds as places for children to play was another part of the original vision, for example. The opening image of the 1976 report is of childhood play: “These sites represent the memory of where one played as a child, where one’s children play today, and where one looks for beauty, fresh air, and green spaces” (“Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program” 1976, 35). The 1993 open space plan continued to promote this image: “Young girls and boys scampering up a large boulder in an urban wild, recreating the primeval acts of play: ‘who’s king/queen of the hill?!’” (Boston Parks and Recreation Department 1993, 10).

Concern about children’s lack of access to informal play outdoors has received significant attention in the media and in education in recent decades. By connecting the urban wilds concept to this issue, urban wilds advocates could potentially draw excitement and resources to creating new ways of engaging children in the urban wilds. This is but one example of a way to expand the vision beyond protection.

Ensure that there is a keeper of the vision

Throughout the history of urban wilds, there has always been a person or group holding the vision of the urban wilds as a citywide concept. It began with Elliot

Rhodeside, it was quickly adopted by Genie Beal and then, through her, by the Boston Conservation Commission, the Environment Department and BNAF. Since the 1990s, BNAN and the Urban Wilds Initiative have been the primary keepers of the vision. Because the urban wilds idea is a decentralized concept rather than a concrete program, if there is no one keeping track of the vision it will not exist.

BNAN currently sees itself as the “keeper of the information” on urban wilds (Burns 2013), making data and resources available to others. While this can facilitate a citywide vision—Paul Sutton, for example, used the information in the 2008 *Urban Wilds E-Report* to keep track of the status of private urban wilds properties (Sutton 2013b)—it is not the same as being keeper of the vision.

The Urban Wilds Council was similarly not an effective way to ensure a citywide vision; it depended on members who were already directing their passions into their local urban wilds. These stewards will rally when there is a specific issue that needs addressing citywide, but they are not going to be the keepers of an ongoing citywide vision. For a council to promote a citywide vision of urban wilds, it would need to engage a new set of people who were specifically interested in the big picture—again, an example would be exploring ways to facilitate children’s play in urban wilds. BNAN will need to decide whether it will be keeper of the vision as well as keeper of the information as it moves into its next period of urban wilds advocacy.

Make connections across jurisdictions

The urban wilds identity could be used to create opportunities and connections far more than it has been used in Boston. Many of the agencies that own urban wilds do not themselves use the term to describe their property, but their shared history and historical urban wilds identity is a potentially powerful tool for building connections and attracting political and financial backing for their efforts. The urban wilds have a strong history of collaboration and coalition building; a coalition of urban wilds managers could share resources, knowledge, and ideas about management and programming, and even run joint programs or initiatives that build on the common identity of the lands as urban wilds.

Continue using the name urban wilds

At the American Society of Landscape Architects session, the question of whether to keep the name “urban wilds” came up during the question and answer period. Is it too confusing? Is it outdated? Should the city’s urban wilds be combined with its other natural areas? The urban wilds name speaks to the unique history; it is telling that other sites have never been added to the list. Without their name, urban wilds will lose their identity and their story. In addition to giving these places their identity, the name “urban wilds” has value for its own evocative nature. The name continues to make people think and question, which is exactly what it was intended to do.

Paul Sutton asked some of the summer youth workers their associations with the name “wild.” He shared that some had more pejorative associations with wilds as places as untamed or messy or dangerous, while others had more positive associations of wilds as untouched or unspoiled (Sutton 2013b). These descriptions speak precisely to the tension that is the power of these places and of the name that describes them. Many of them are untamed and messy; none is “untouched.” Most have been allowed to remain “wild.” These are flexible spaces that allow for creativity, innovation, and numerous ways of creating meaning. The name “urban wilds” suits them well and will continue to do so into the future.

The Future of Urban Wilds

The 1976 and 1990 urban wilds reports both highlight a quote from William Whyte: “The land that is still to be saved must be saved in the next few years. We have no luxury of choice. We must make our commitment now and look to this landscape as the last one. For us, it will be” (William H. Whyte as quoted in “Boston Urban Wilds: A Natural Area Conservation Program” 1976, 4). For early urban wilds advocates, this expressed the urgency they saw for preserving the unprotected urban wilds in Boston by whatever means possible. Today, another quote from Whyte’s 1968 *The Last Landscape* can guide those seeking to create networks of special places in cities. “From here on out we are going to have to work much more inventively with the

smaller spaces, the overlooked odds and ends; we are going to have to rediscover the obsolescent rights of way that thread the metropolitan area” (Whyte 2002, 10).

The concept of Boston’s urban wilds has persisted through the years because advocates have worked inventively with these bits and pieces of land while holding tenaciously to the idea that collectively they hold a larger significance and value. In the early days advocates worked inventively to preserve the urban wilds, and in later years they worked inventively to maintain them, to connect them, and to help make them relevant to Boston’s residents. The overlooked odds and ends of land that can be threaded into a network in cities may be smaller today than were the sites identified for Boston’s urban wilds, but the potential for creating something big is equally as powerful.

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