



Sorting through some books the other day I came across Colin Ward and Anthony Fyson's "Streetwork" written in 1973. The book has the anarchic subtitle of "The Exploding School" and the authors present a strong case for young people to free themselves from the structures of the classroom and become involved in planning and decision making in their local communities. Whereas "fieldwork" at this time was concerned largely with observation, recording and analysis, in "streetwork" the authors were encouraging teachers and their students to view their neighbourhood with a critical eye, identify local issues that influence their lives and strive to take action. One starting point was the design of town trails to encourage awareness of history, architecture, community space and environment. Students were encouraged to contact planners, architects and local councillors and become actively involved in their communities.

I bought the book when I was teaching geography and outdoor activities at a boys' secondary modern school in Ellesmere Port and together with a

colleague was inspired into taking groups out into the local environment to explore issues such as urban decay, facilities for play and recreation, public transport and water quality. We used kayaks and narrow boats on the canal to explore the little viewed parts of the town. I was surprised at the variety of wildlife close to housing and industry. I'd grown up on a large council estate on the edge of Liverpool and apart from recognising a few garden birds had little contact with nature other than during our annual holiday to Snowdonia. But here, close to oil refineries, a car factory and a Ship canal was a world of butterflies, dragonflies, herons, kestrels, kingfishers and short-eared owls.

There were other developments in the 1970s and 1980s which encouraged urban outdoor recreation and learning. Country parks were established within, or close to, many of our cities and ranger services set up to promote urban recreation, education and conservation. The country parks in the Manchester valleys were a fine example. In the Tame valley, for instance, rangers became enthusiastic outdoor community workers running a range of activities for all ages from bat watching to rock climbing. At

## EARTH WISE

by Geoff Cooper

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## Outdoors in the City

this time the wider countryside was getting a bad press; hedges and trees were being removed, ponds drained and there was the spread of over-fertilised crops grown as monocultures.

Word was getting around that the towns were richer in wildlife than the countryside. Sites such as Pennington Flash, an area of old coal mining subsidence near Leigh, were attracting some 300 species of birds and a greater variety of wildlife than any of our national parks. In the early 1980s Chris Baines, the broadcaster and environmentalist was a leading light in setting up the Urban Wildlife Group and encouraging wildlife gardening. In London, The Ecological Parks Trust created wildlife areas on disused urban sites and it was also about this time that the first city farms appeared in Britain.

Ken Ogilvie in his recent landmark book on the history of outdoor education, “Roots and Wings”, describes parallel developments in urban outdoor pursuits’ facilities during the late 1970s and the Sports Council’s projects of the 1980s to set up a range of city based Outdoor Activity Initiatives to encourage wider participation in the outdoors through activities such as sailing, kayaking and climbing.

There are common threads to all these early urban outdoor projects. They include people of all ages becoming actively involved in their local communities and green spaces. Many benefits result. There are opportunities to meet friends, enjoy exercise, play and adventure, relax, connect with nature, gain knowledge and new skills. Some of these facilities and services are now being lost as local councils and charities are forced to make savings on staff. Green spaces are being built upon, nature reserves abandoned and urban ranger services drastically reduced.

What is the cost of this to individuals and communities? What are the increased health, environmental and social costs of these short-sighted policies? Recent research by greenspace scotland funded by Scottish Natural Heritage analysed the Social Return on Investment for four urban nature sites and found that for every £1 invested between £3 and £20 of social, economic and environmental benefits were generated (see: [www.greenspacescotland.org.uk](http://www.greenspacescotland.org.uk)) It’s a shame we have to put monetary measures on our quality of life and wellbeing but this may be the only way to get the attention of governments and help them appreciate the bigger picture. ■