



Photo Credit: bookfinch

## De-Regulating Wildness

By Julia Triman

I came to the University of Virginia to work with Professor Tim Beatley on his Biophilic Cities Project. I was so inspired by his research, his writing, his message of finding ways to connect people and nature in cities. What I have learned during my time at UVa has surpassed even what I might have hoped – and surprised me in unexpected ways. I recently completed my dissertation under Tim’s direction, “Regulating Wildness: Planning Discourses of Weeds and Wildlife in Washington, D.C.” (available through the [UVa Library catalog](#)) and the only thing I am sure of about nature now is that it is impossible to simply define. Before I started my work with Biophilic Cities, I thought I knew what “nature” was: I love hiking, being

outdoors, plants, and animals. Nature was beautiful, something apart from human-constructed “things.” But after several years spent studying urban and environmental planning and landscape architecture, I became entangled in questions about the nature of nature, specifically through the lens of urban weeds: if they are not “nature,” what are they? What is “nature”: where does it start, where does it end? Is it even a useful term at all? How are humans related to this idea of “nature” – are they truly something separate or is it one big tangled web?

### Background

Often, the “nature” people think about and care about in cities is curated and tended

specifically by humans in the image of what humans want to see and enjoy. There are other nonhuman participants in city life – plants and animals – that exist within and beyond human attempts to control and enforce order and regularity in cities. My research explores the tensions between human attempts to define, delineate, and control the meaning and material of “nature” on the ground in cities, and the flourishing plant and animal life that persists despite and because of human activity.

### Natures

To begin my dissertation, I examined the ways planning scholars in five contemporary planning journals used the word “nature.” In approximately

twenty years of publication, the five journals - *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *Urban Studies*, *Environment and Planning A*, *Journal of Urban Affairs* and *Journal of Planning Education and Research* - had surprisingly few references to nature. Interestingly, significantly more book reviews than original articles in the planning journals use the term “nature.” This might suggest either that those writing about “nature” as it pertains to planning may seek to publish these types of works outside of academic journals or that the journal missions, publication tendencies, and/or submission guidelines do not allow for these types of inquiry. I used NVivo Pro for Windows to code and analyze each reference to “nature” in articles discussing urban nature specifically, and after several rounds of coding determined six meta-themes (see Diagram 1). These meta-themes collectively organize into two distinct

theoretical orientations: those viewing nature as a thing that benefits or harms humans and those viewing nature as plural, complex, intertwined and co-produced by humans.

While a variety of urban natures are evident in recent planning scholarship, the voices are few and the volume of discussion is quite low. This translates into very little planning-led discourse about urban nature in contemporary academic planning journals, which is problematic given the ubiquity and importance of nature-related discussion and action about natures, both theoretically and materially. Planners and planning scholars are uniquely positioned to influence work happening on the ground in cities, and therefore deeper engagement with a variety of natures has the potential to deepen and strengthen urban and environmental planning practice.

### Weeds

My “Regulating Weeds” chapter (titled “Weeding Washington” in a forthcoming article in the *Journal of Planning History*), examines some of these themes through a case study of planning and regulatory actions in Washington, D.C. at the turn of the twentieth century. Discourses fomented in the 1890s about weeds being a menace to public health, public safety, and aesthetic appeal of the city. Residents throughout the city, presumably many of them wealthy property owners, as well as journalists and lawmakers, collectively constructed political and popular discourse that attempted to establish weeds as threatening human health, endangering public safety, and marring the aesthetic integrity of the city and by extension the nation as a whole. Weeds, weedy lots, and absentee property owners throughout the city were villainized as disrupting attempts

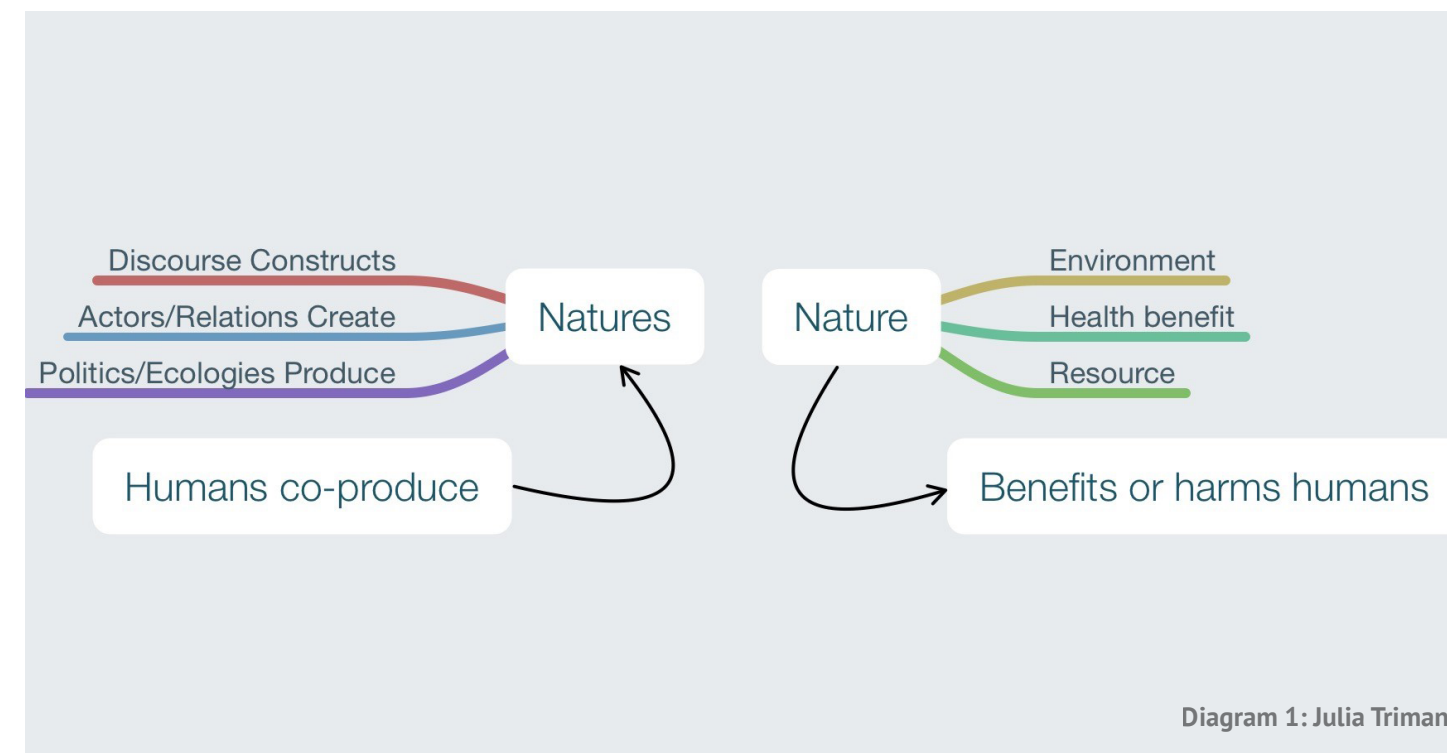


Diagram 1: Julia Triman

at order and basic sanitation and cleanliness. In March of 1899, “An Act to cause the removal of weeds from lands in the city of Washington, District of Columbia” (The Weed Removal Act) passed with very little debate or discussion by the United States Congress. When the Act passed, expectations were established that “the weed problem” would be solved, and that people would no longer need to tangle with weedy unwanted plants throughout the city.

In the ensuing years, however, the Health Officer of the District of Columbia made a very convincing case that weeds actually did not pose any sort of health risk to District residents, and that the Act should be repealed or overturned entirely due to lack of risk and impossibility of enforcement. Attempts to achieve a “weed-free” city were impossible, not just because of the plants’ abundance and superior ability to reproduce and occupy greater and greater space, but also because of the largely unacknowledged relationship between human activity and material and the plants’ success and livelihood. The Weed Removal Act reflected the legacy of colonial ideals and visions of a perfect, utopic place free of visual and material evidence of messiness and anything antithetical to either orderly “nature” in the form of planted trees and gardens or “wild” places. Weedy plants offered an opportunity for people to express a vision for taste, simplicity, and order by providing material antithetical to those ideals: the weeds of the time period

revealed fissures in utopic visions for the city, and persisted in thwarting these visions despite legal and physical attempts to eliminate them.

### Wildlife

My final case chapter jumps ahead one hundred years to another series of discourses about the status and presence of animals in the District of Columbia. Environmental discourse and public expectation for “nature” and “wildness” to be kept either in a designated place or outside the city altogether continued throughout the twentieth century and is reflected clearly in the discourse around Washington’s wildlife regulatory and planning activity in the 2010s. The particular mix of both a municipal-level Wildlife Protection Act along with being the only city to have a State Wildlife Action Plan for an urban context makes Washington an extremely unique and interesting case with comparatively a great deal of recent discourse related to urban animals.

The city’s controversial [2010 Wildlife Protection Act](#) attempted to establish basic rights for humane treatment for “nuisance wildlife” in the city, and raised and incited a great deal of discussion and argument about the status of various types of animals as welcome or not in the city. Pest control operators argued that the new law would make their businesses more expensive, while those affiliated with the Humane Society of the United States and other similar organizations argued for the

moral and ethical imperative to treat animals with respect and care. Though the 2010 Act explicitly excluded commensal rodents from protection, misinformed elected officials created a firestorm of political banter about how the new law would cause District residents and officials to dump dead rats in nearby Maryland and Virginia. The law itself and the intense debate, both informed and not, that it inspired speak to the level of fear people have for heterotopic animals sharing city space and the need to continually work with urban animals who are part of city life whether part of grand visions for orderly “nature” or not.

The [2015 Wildlife Action Plan](#), simultaneously narrow in scope and broad in reach as a part of a Federally mandated plan at the state level, but with implications nationally and globally, similarly incited a great deal of angst about the status of animals as nonhuman members of city, with a strong emphasis on maintaining and promoting separate “nature” spaces apart from “developed” areas in the city. The Wildlife Action Plan is perhaps the most explicit of all examples herein, in which environmental discourse aligned with dualistic visions of how humans and “nature” do and should operate. These dualistic visions are abundantly clear and reiterated throughout the plan via the selection criteria for species of greatest conservation need, the commentary about “precious natural areas,” and the visual material including maps that establish “nature” as a



Diagram 2: Julia Triman, Sarah Pate, and Maddie Hoagland-Hanson

