



Marching for Our Lives and for Nature

By Tim Beatley

My high school daughter recently boarded a bus very early in the morning, carrying her to the Marching for Our Lives protest in Washington, DC, where she spent the day. She worked the night before on a sign that carried a Nelson Mandela quote. Seeing her and half a million young people (likely more) descend on Washington was a moment of optimism in an otherwise dismal spring. The unfathomable level of gun violence seen in the Parkland, Florida shootings and the tumult of too many similar events in recent history tests our collective sense that change is possible. Deep

sadness has been followed by hope and inspiration as we see the leadership of high school students, who have become voices of reason and beacons of hope. I'm not sure why we are surprised by this. They are clearly angry about the direction the world is taking. I know from my own high school-age daughter the trauma and fear that attending school today entails, complete with actual lockdowns and numerous drills to prepare for the kinds of unthinkable things that happened in Parkland.

How does the tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas

High School connect with or relate to biophilia, and to biophilic cities?

There are many connections, I believe. It starts for me with the school's namesake, someone who for many of us was an admired champion of conservation, author of the classic 1947 book *River of Grass*, and tireless advocate for the Everglades. Others have made similar connections. [The Washington Post ran a story on Stoneman Douglas's life](#), noting her activism on behalf of the Everglades: "She believed that the circumstances demanded her participation." She would

very much approve of the work these young people are doing.

As the Parkland students have been quick to note, many of the ideas offered for hardening schools (more bullet proof glass, arming teachers), won't do anything to protect them (and us) beyond schools. Visiting a local park, hiking a community forest, tending a garden plot, watching shorebirds at the beach, are just a few of the many natureful experiences that require us to be in the public realm; indeed nature is the ultimate public space. Tackling guns and gun violence make sense to ensure that we may continue to actively enjoy and

visit and celebrate the nature all around us in cities.

We need these nature spaces to heal, to celebrate, to come together. We need to be near trees and shorelines and walking on urban trails -- we need natureful spaces in which to grieve, to contemplate, and sometimes to argue. Nature is an essential backdrop to our lives and when these places are not safe they lose those functions for us. This is one reason why the Parkland kids have it right: we can fortify schools, but that misses the larger point.

In the face of such unthinkable events as Parkland, I find that

nature is often what often gives me the strongest sense of solace and hope. Nature is a balm in the face of anger and hatred, and increasingly the evidence suggests that in the presence of nature we are more likely to be generous, to be cooperative, to be more concerned about the long term, in short to be better human beings. This is at least a partial antidote to Parkland.

About a year ago, I had the chance to film a segment of a new documentary film about connecting oceans and cities (called "Ocean Cities") at the



[Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center](#), which shares its namesake with the Parkland school. We spent several hours filming something they called the "Seagrass Adventure", where groups of 4th-graders from area schools waded into the Atlantic ocean to

see what marine life they could find. They divided that day into groups of around eight, each accompanied by a naturalist.

Each pair of students was given a net and encouraged to scoop the sandy sea bottom to see what they could find.

The scene was magical as kids discovered many things and brought them to the surface to a chorus of collective surprise. There were filefish and sea worms and Queen Conks. My favorite discovery that day was a puffer fish: it looked to us like an over-inflated tennis ball,

but when deposited into the floating receptacle it returned to the shape of fish, a wondrous transformation. This was a visit these kids would not forget, and we captured a bit of this magic on film.

I believe there are clear connections between violence of all kinds towards other humans, and violence towards nature and the natural world. It is a fair question to ask whether we ever hope to truly care for the other organisms and the larger ecosystems we admittedly depend on if we are not able to prevent events like Parkland. Erich Fromm's original notion of Biophilia, and the way in which he defined the concept, was about the contrast between those choosing goodness, life, and hope, as contrasted with those who support the opposite. Fromm was trying to make sense of the horrors of war in the aftermath of WWII. Wars have continued of course, and the war on nature is as relentless as ever. But in the concept of biophilia perhaps lies the kernel of a different approach. Nature can help to foster the best in us all, the common humanity, and the care, respect and, dare I say, love, we must show for each other and the larger biological community of life with which we share this planet.

Much of the nature found in cities is harbored in private spaces, of course; often these are places we don't see and can't access -- backyards, balcony feeders, rooftop gardens - -and they are

important places of solace and respite. But much of the nature we want to spend time in and celebrate is in the public realm, that is part of the point of it. We want to be in nature, enjoy seeing and hearing birds, for instance, or walking in a park, not separated from people but amongst others. And there are special times in our lives when we need and must come together in public spaces to act together, and these are often urban parks.



Statue of Marjory Stoneman Douglas at Fairchild Tropical Botanic, Miami. Photo Credit: Lisa Jacobs

Here then we have a problem. If we fear for our lives in public spaces, how can we enjoy parks and city forests, how can we wander and stroll the streets of our neighborhoods, how can we paddle our harbors or rivers? To be outside requires not only a shared sense of community and personal safety, but confidence in the reasonable laws and regulations that create this safe context for us to come together. There is no place for military weaponry here, certainly no place for guns of any kind in places where we come together to debate, disagree, share, and protest. In this way, the nature and the natural spaces of communities are at the heart of what makes

democracy work.

I have also been thinking a lot about the role of protest, something critical in the fight to protect nature. A city (or culture) must avoid making earnest and heartfelt protest difficult or dangerous. As with the Washington march, and countless others, it is an essential element of a free society. And it is an essential avenue for expressing our collective values about the natural world; it is a part of the collective conscience that steers us to a better, gentler path; one that recognizes the need for nature in our lives and in our communities.

I spent much of June and July (2017) in Perth, Western Australia learning about and [filming the story of how a community came together to oppose a highway expansion project](#) (known as Roe 8) that was threatening to destroy a remarkable ancient banksia woodland and wetland. Thousands actively campaigned in a variety of ways, occupying trees, marching, showing up ahead of land clearance crews, standing up for wildlife and nature. There are many lessons to learn here, including: how to creatively protest -- with humor, music, poetry. One protester dressed up in a Black Cockatoo costume and confronted the Premier at a shopping mall.

The road was stopped ultimately, but not before about half the land was cleared. I saw the sad aftermath of this campaign: 500-year old



Kate Kelly, Founder of Save Beelihar Wetlands
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley

trees felled and lying on the ground, and a landscape that had been brutally scraped and bulldozed. The violence of this land clearance was not lost on those who witnessed it, including traumatized children. Bandicoots and other small mammals and birds were seen fleeing, and witnesses (including children) were understandably shaken and emotional at what they were witnessing.

My filmmaking colleagues (Peter Newman and Linda Blagg) and I spent one afternoon filming Kate Kelly, one of the main organizers of the opposition to the road, founder of the group [Save Beelihar Wetlands](#). She took us into one

of the remarkable remnants saved from the bulldozers. She talked compellingly of the way that forests like that one soften us, open us to feelings and connections; it is her church, she tells us.

Another day, we filmed Noongar elder Noel Nannup, who spoke of the sacred role these lands have played in the lives and culture of his people. These lands contain storylines and are places that the Noongar return to throughout their lives. It was a privilege to help to collect these voices and to tell this hopeful story of how biophilia was channeled into a potent political force.

Later in 2017, I had an

experience that further reminded me of the essential value of protest, and the role of nature in reminding us of the sanctity of life. Speaking at the annual Land and Water Symposium at Kent State University, I visited the memorial there to the victims of the National Guard shooting there in May 1970. Four students were killed and nine others wounded when guardsmen opened fire. It was a horrific and defining moment as the nation grappled with an unpopular war. These college kids, not much older than those from Parkland, similarly saw the need to stand up against something they saw as senseless, in this case the carnage of the Vietnam War.



Cleared Wetlands in Perth, Australia
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley



Endangered Numbat Mural
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley

It is worth remembering that nature, in the form of a flower (“flower power”) became the symbol of the peace movement of the 1960s and 1970s. I remember the imagery of the anti-Vietnam protester facing a wall of soldiers, bravely placing flowers in the barrels of their M1 rifles. Fast forward a few decades to the work of Rutgers environmental psychologist Jeannette Haviland-Jones who showed through her creative work how humans presented with flowers respond with a true smile -- the so-called Duchenne Smile -- demonstrating biophilia and the deep and innate ways that nature can reach us.

In the spirit of embracing this remarkable power of nature, our Biophilic Cities Network continues to grow and blossom. Most gratefully, we have received a [two-year grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) to grow the network, deepen the connections among its partner cities and build new

alliances with other networks and organizations.

New Cities joining include: Curridabat, Costa Rica; Reston, Virginia; and Fremantle, in Western Australia. Conversations with prospective partner cities have been extensive and numerous: from Toronto to Richmond to Dubai.

Reston and Fremantle are two examples of the biophilic power of smaller cities. Reston, a famous new town, was conceived from its beginning as a city in a park. Its biophilic stats are impressive: some fifty-five miles of trails, a tree canopy coverage of fifty-three percent, and a high percentage of residents participating in some form of citizen science from dragonfly counts to stream monitoring. Fremantle, a bit smaller still, is the region’s historic port city, with strong environmental bona fides, and a strong connection to water. It has recently adopted a new

[Urban Forest Plan](#), has piloted installation of vertical green walls in the city, and is one of the most impressive walking cities anywhere. Public art, such as the endangered numbat shown above (the state’s official mammal), is a priority, and the city has adopted a unique [one-percent-for-art public art policy](#) that applies to private as well as public projects.

We continue to explore new relationships and new partnerships with a variety of organizations, including the U.S. Green Building Council, Green Roofs for Healthy Cities, and the Half Earth Project, among others. We are collaborating in several major upcoming conferences where Biophilic Cities will be a major theme, including the International Federation of Landscape Architects World Congress in Singapore in July 2018 and the Activating Biophilic Cities Conference in London in September 2018. We recognize that growing our global network

and achieving the vision of Biophilic Cities will require the work and efforts of many people and many different disciplines and voices.

Our monthly partner city calls have become a highlight for sharing, inspiring, and growing the global movement, and we continue to work on ways to facilitate interaction between and among cities. This includes regional meetings and exploring new web based tools for connecting and collaborating.

This past April we had a very successful second [Biophilic Leadership Summit](#), co-hosted by the Biophilic Institute and the community of Serenbe, near Atlanta. Leaders from the biophilic design field converged there for three days to hear about and discuss inspiring projects, ideas, and future directions. Social equity and inclusivity were key themes this year as we learned of remarkable efforts of the [Truly Living Well Center for Natural Urban Agriculture](#) and the [Greening Youth Foundation](#) to tap the power of nature in underserved communities in Atlanta. We also had the remarkable opportunity to spend several hours interviewing and filming students and teachers at the [Chattahoochee Hills Charter School](#). This K-8 grade school is unusual in many respects. It is designed as a series of smaller classroom buildings embedded in a forest, where the kids spend a large part of their day outside. They tend food gardens, go on hikes, and use the nature around them as a laboratory and extended learning environment.

There are pigs and chickens, and the sounds of birdsong all around. I came away convinced of the promise of these students -- they are learning how we are all connected, how we are and must be part of the environment, and how we ought to be compassionate about the other forms of life with which we share the world. They, like the Parkland students, are not likely to just stand by but are learning to stand up for nature (and for themselves).

I have been heartened to see the now more common references to Biophilic Cities in the press and in social media. Our partner cities, moreover, increasingly represent points of reference. One small example can be seen in the recent controversy over the cutting down of street trees in the UK city of Sheffield. As a result of a flawed and unpopular contract with a management company, thousands of beloved street trees have been cut down, to the surprise and sadness of many residents. A protest has been mounted, coordinated through an umbrella group called [STAG -- Sheffield Tree Action Groups](#). The protests, around single trees, have been personal and courageous. In the case of one tree threatened with felling, [the Vernon Oak](#), residents mustered with “songs, poems and speeches and a good crowd of 120 people.” What has been unfolding in Sheffield seems inconsistent with the ideals of a Biophilic City and some observers have noticed. As one recently tweeted: “What happened Sheffield? You were once a leading biophilic city. Not anymore it seems.”

Resources:

Biophilic Leadership Summit. <http://biophilicsummit.com>.

Chattahoochee Hills Charter School. <https://chatthillscharter.org>.

City of Fremantle. Public Art. <https://www.fremantle.wa.gov.au/publicart>.

City of Fremantle. Urban Forest Plan. <https://www.fremantle.wa.gov.au/council/key-council-strategies/urban-forest-plan>.

Greening Youth Foundation. <https://www.gyfoundation.org>.

Jessica Contrera (March 22, 2018). “At March for Our Lives, you’ll see her name again. But who was Marjory Stoneman Douglas?” The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/at-march-for-our-lives-youll-see-her-name-again-but-who-was-marjory-stoneman-douglas/2018/03/22/e85dc728-2d49-11e8-8688-e053ba58f1e4_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b78bc348b5da.

Never Again: a story about a highway and remnant bushland [video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uiVUiAqUzU>.

Save Beelihar Wetlands. <http://save-beeliharwetlands.com>.

Sheffield Tree Action Groups (STAG). <https://savesheffieldtrees.org.uk>.

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center. <http://www.biscaynenaturecenter.org>.

Truly Living Well Center for Natural Urban Agriculture. <https://www.trulylivingwell.com>.

University of Virginia, School of Architecture (Jan. 23, 2018). UVA’s Biophilic Cities Receives Grant to Expand Its Reach and Impact. <https://www.arch.virginia.edu/news/uvas-biophilic-cities-receives-grant-to-expand-its-reach-and-impact>.

Vernon’s Week (Oct. 22, 2017). tree-bound: a sheffield’s community’s love for its trees. <https://treeboundblog.wordpress.com/2017/10/22/ver-nons-week>.