

Trees Charlotte
Plant, Preserve & Celebrate!

5th Annual Urban Forestry Summit

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Larry Selzer is president and CEO of The Conservation Fund, one of the nation's top-ranked environmental nonprofits, based in Arlington, VA. The only environmental group in the country chartered for both conservation and economic development, the Fund has protected more than 7.5 million acres since 1985.

Urban Forests – A Bridge to Nature

5th Annual Urban Forestry Summit Address – Larry Selzer

When my brother and I were young boys, in New Haven, Connecticut, both avid bird-watchers, we always knew which trees to head for during spring migration.

You see, certain trees, in this case oak trees, always had more birds in them - sometimes 3 or 4 times more warblers and vireos than trees of similar size right next door.

It wasn't until quite recently that I learned the reason for this phenomenon – oak trees carry 10x the number of native bugs in them than any other tree, and the birds were merely

congregating where the food was – of course I didn't know any of that then, but I do remember being amazed at how important a single tree could be.

Now multiply that by hundreds of thousands of trees, and add in all the things that Dave just discussed - storm water management, air quality improvement, temperature control, carbon sequestration – and you get a sense of the power of an urban forest. It's like having a whole new public utility spread out across the entire city.

A utility that is as important as our roads and bridges, sewers and communication lines. A green utility that is part of the essential infrastructure of the city; green infrastructure if you will, and just as we plan for and invest in our gray infrastructure, we should plan for and invest in our green infrastructure.

Open space shouldn't be the land that is left over after everything else has been developed, and trees shouldn't be an afterthought to be addressed once all the other infrastructure is in place.

The urban canopy should be built right into the growth and development plans for any city, just as you have done right here in Charlotte.

Now forests as infrastructure may be a new and different concept, but listen to what, Peter Kilborn, a writer for the New

York Times, once said about our nation's system of interstate highways:

"The 46,000-mile network of limited-access roads that make up the Interstate System is a linear economy-on-wheels, a distinct and self-sustaining 51st state, in a sense, that generates life and commerce . . ."

What a marvelous description – a linear economy on wheels...a distinct and self-sustaining 51st state.

Well, I suggest that our nation's urban forests could be considered our 52nd state – a self-sustaining million-acre economy in green. From storm water management to temperature control to carbon sequestration, urban forests provide billions of dollars of value. Including through value-added manufacturing.

Through a program of The Conservation Fund called the Natural Capital Investment Fund, where we invest in small businesses that are demonstrating the sustainable use of natural resources, we have helped to expand a wonderful company called City Bench, which by coincidence just happens to be located in my home town of New Haven.

City Bench grew out of the passion of two brothers for building beautiful objects with meaning and a story, as well as their reverence for the trees that line the city's streets.

New Haven removes more than 600 trees each year, New York City fells 7,000, and hundreds of thousands more come down across the country. Most of these grand, historic trees are relegated to the landfill, ground into mulch, or chopped into firewood each year.

City Bench extends the life left in those trees by building uniquely hand-crafted furniture that tells their stories. Community and connection to place are built into everything they create. Their pieces have a "birth certificate" describing the tree's origin, significance, and story. They are beautiful pieces and we have one prominently displayed in our offices in Virginia. There are over 70 billion trees in U.S. metropolitan areas, think about the opportunities for job creation that they represent.

But beyond jobs, beyond air, water and carbon, there are two other reasons to invest in our urban forests.

The first is to help educate our citizens about the role the natural world plays in sustaining our quality of life. You see, we now live in a scientifically illiterate country and we have lost the understanding of our dependence on nature.

We no longer believe in science and scientific truths. How else can we explain tolerating a United States Congresswoman standing on the floor of the House asking, "how can salmon be endangered if I can buy it in a can?"

Or a U. S Senator shouting that "global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people!"

Up until quite recently, science and scientists were revered, but that is no longer the case. Today, we denigrate scientists by calling them 'elite'. We separate ourselves from them so that we can more easily dismiss their findings as either unimportant or untrue.

And this is exacerbated by the entertainment nature of our media outlets.

A recent analysis by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that if you tune in for 5 hours' worth of cable news, you will catch only 1 minute's coverage of science and technology – compared with 10 minutes of celebrity and entertainment, 12 minutes of accidents and disasters, and 26 minutes of crime.

As a result, 80 percent of Americans can't read the New York Times Science Section and only half of the adult population knows the earth orbits the sun once per year.

Too many influential people today don't see the centrality of science in their lives. In fact, quite the opposite. Science is being positioned as an impediment to progress and quality of life. And too many scientists don't know how to explain science to the rest of the world. So, the two sides are separated by what British novelist C. P. Snow called a 'gulf of mutual incomprehension.'

Trees can help bridge this gulf, bringing science back into the center of our lives, and us back closer to nature so that we can make better decisions about land and land use, water and wildlife; how to organize our lives so that we limit as much as possible our overall footprint on this fragile planet.

The second reason to invest in our urban forests is one that brings me back to the power of a single tree, like those mighty oaks that attracted me when I was a young birder – and that is the power to engage a child.

You see, over the past 30 years, children of the digital age have become increasingly alienated from the natural world with disturbing implications, not only for their physical fitness, but also for their long-term mental and spiritual health, and of course, for the environment.

Young people who grow up without spending time in nature are much less likely to be strong champions of the environment when they reach voting age.

Twenty or thirty years from now, we will have a generation of leaders in our public, private and nonprofits institutions who will be asked to make policy and budgetary decisions about forests and wetlands who have never seen a forest, or waded a stream, or simply gotten their hands dirty in a garden.

While opening up a wealth of “virtual” experiences to the young, all of the new technologies have made it easier and easier for children to spend less time outside.

Wall Street, of course, calls this progress. But if that’s true, then Ogden Nash was right when he said, “Progress may have been a good thing at one time, but it went on a little too long.”

Put another way, the market has its place, but the market needs to be kept in its place.

Recently, I passed a giant billboard from IKEA that read “Kids, go play inside!” What does it say about our priorities as a society when we choose to market clever furniture in place of clever kids? When we will drive miles out of our way to buy free range chicken but are too busy or too scared to encourage free range children?

There is a dullness in our young people today because they have lost the spark that comes from interacting with the world around them. It is time we reclaimed the higher ground.

But how do we get there from here? Martin Luther King said that the success of any social movement depends on its ability to “show a world where people will want to go.”

But where is that?

You and I may want to go to Yellowstone or the mountains of North Carolina. But for a child in East Philadelphia, East St. Louis or East L. A., it may be someplace entirely different.

In fact, it may be the abandoned lot next door -- New York City has over 47,000 vacant land parcels totaling thousands of acres.

For decades, these have been considered liabilities, to be fenced off, avoided. What a waste. Where is the vision, the creativity in that?

Mark Twain said “you cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”

I prefer Agatha Christie’s outlook better.

You see, she was married to one of the preeminent archaeologists of her time. Once when she was asked what's it like to be married to an archaeologist, she replied..."It's wonderful! The older I get, the more interested he is in me!"

She was clever enough to see her age as an asset rather than a liability. And we need to be clever enough to recognize that New York City with its 47,000 abandoned lots has an amazing asset just waiting to be deployed.

This brings up a central point in our efforts to reconnect children with nature. As we become more of an urban nation, and as the demographics of our country continue to change, reconnecting children with nature will be less about bringing kids to nature, and more about bringing nature to the kids.

Taking an inner city kid from Charlotte to Yellowstone is a bit like sending her to the moon for a week. It is too big a leap. We need to bring nature to these kids in a way that makes sense to them. Then, later, after they have developed a connection, a love for nature, we can make our way to Yellowstone.

By the year 2050, 85% of Americans will live in cities. If we are to make nature relevant to these Americans, then we must recognize the value, not only of our national forests and wildlife refuges, but also of our neighborhood parks, wooded cul-de-sacs, and abandoned lots that have yet to be restored.

For too long, we in the environmental movement have defined nature in terms of wildness, far away and pristine. And the result is that nature has become a foreign country that we get to visit only once in a while. That will never do.

Nature must be nearby, accessible. It must be returned to our day care centers, our schools and our communities.

Consider this, there are 40 million diabetics in this country today; there will be 60 million in 2025; and, if we don't change course, 80 million in the year 2050!

Already, we spend \$2 trillion each year on health care with 95% of that spent on direct medical service – and only 5% allocated to preventing disease and promoting health and a healthy lifestyle.

The implications for the country are severe – from a health perspective, to the impact on local, state and national budgets, to corporate competitiveness, to the future of our magnificent land and water legacy. We need to rethink our approach to wellness and health – nature as the 1st prescription rather than the last.

We know that patients in rooms with tree views have shorter hospitalizations and that children with ADHD who have access to natural areas are calmer and require less medication.

And we know that the presence of trees outside apartment buildings in a public housing project in inner-city Chicago predicted better coping skills, less crime and less violence.

And finally, we know that among children who play in paved over playgrounds, the leaders tend to be the most physically mature; while among children who play on green playgrounds, the leaders tend to be the most creative.

Remember, these are the future leaders of our country. With all the complexity in the world today, from global warming, to free trade and immigration, to ethnic and religious intolerance, do we really believe we can lead based on strength alone?

All Americans care about these issues. They may come to the table for different reasons, but they want a seat at the table. And we need to set a place for them. Poor people, people of color, people with disabilities, and others who have the least access to natural settings, and who may need it the most. As a nation, we will be paid back many times over.

My favorite lapel button says simply "The meek are getting ready." Now I'm not sure if the meek will inherit the earth, but I am sure young people will. And you need to help them get ready.

Conclusion:

Now, I'd like to leave you with a few final thoughts.

As I travel across all 50 states of this great country, too often I witness a culture of confrontation, rather than collaboration. Too often I am reminded of John Gardner's phrase "The war of the parts against the whole".

Over fears of liability, we post 'No Running' signs in county parks. Over fears that our children may encounter a sociopath, we encourage sedentary, anti-social behavior by allowing our kids to spend hours in front of an electronic screen.

And over fears of nature itself, we quarantine kids under virtual house arrest, thereby ensuring that they too will fear the very thing they need the most.

For tens of thousands of years, kids went outside and played in nature, and we are reversing that in a matter of decades. The area beyond which children are free to roam has shrunk by 89% in the past 20 years.

It simply doesn't add up.

We need a Children's Bill of Rights that is explicit about the freedom to explore and improvise, about the right to experience nature in a meaningful way.

If the world of our future, with all its complexity, will demand people who are able to understand and adapt, who have creativity and compassion, can we afford anything less?

In the Declaration of Independence, it says: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. With all we know about the benefits of nature to children's health, cognitive ability and socialization, shouldn't access to nature be an unalienable right?

Christopher Reeve, the actor who was paralyzed in a riding accident, had on the wall of his room when he was in rehab a picture of the space shuttle blasting off, autographed by every astronaut then at NASA. On top of the picture it said "We found nothing is impossible".

And Reeve said, "That should be our motto. Not a Democratic motto, not a Republican motto, but an American motto. Because it's not something one party can do alone. It's something we as a nation must do together."

He went on to say, "So many of our dreams at first seem impossible. Then they seem improbable. And then, when we summon the will, they soon become inevitable."

Whole and healthy children, vast, intact landscapes and of forests and lakes, vibrant cities like Charlotte with hundreds of thousands of beautiful trees – it is time we began to speak of these things as if they are not only possible, but inevitable.

My home town of New Haven had the first public tree planting program in America, producing a canopy of mature trees (including some large [elms](#)) that gave New Haven the nickname "The Elm City".^[6]

And almost every town of any size in Connecticut has an Elm Street, named for the popular trees. Colchester, Manchester, and Winchester all have their Elm Streets; as do New Canaan, New London, and New Milford.

Photographs from the early 1900s show many of the trees planted in the 1700s and early 1800s grown to immense size.

The Wethersfield Elm, planted in 1758, was famous as the largest elm tree in America, over 30 feet in circumference and 100 feet high. It was sometimes described as "the most magnificent tree east of the Rockies."

But in the 1930s these stately elms began to die. A fungal infestation, spread by bark beetles, ravaged the closely planted elms that lined Connecticut streets.

Even the majestic Wethersfield Elm succumbed to Dutch Elm disease in 1953.

Recently though, through research and renewed investments in tree-planting, a glimmer of hope has emerged that the elm can be restored. What a magnificent thing that would be.

You see, investing in elm trees is more than just planting trees. It is a tangible investment in the future of a city. It is an expression of hope that says we can balance economic and environmental needs, that we will improve our quality of life and thus attract the businesses of the future, and that we care about the civic engagement of our young people, for they will inherent and must be good stewards of all that we have done.

Here in Charlotte, you already have an incredible forest in place – healthy and vibrant. You have a dedicated group – Trees Charlotte – and you have corporate leaders and elected officials who understand that the urban forest in Charlotte is part of the city’s identity, part of what makes the city a wonderful place to live, work and play.

I hope that you will recommit to the bold goals that you have set. Maintaining the great urban forest of Charlotte will position the

city well for generations to come. Other great cities are watching, and their citizens need you to succeed as well.

Thank you for inviting me to be with you here tonight.