Persistent Ruralities or Emergent Urbanities? Gathering in the City

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Recent planning discourse emphasizes the need to develop or expand urban greenfrastructure, the mosaic of vegetated and non-built patches in urban areas. This includes expanding natural areas, restoring native ecosystems, and tree-planting activities. This renewed interest in nature is a prominent feature of the global urban sustainability framework and has important implications for the spatial distribution, composition, and structure of urban forests. Proponents often valorize ecosystem service values and the positive impacts on neighborhood aesthetics, property values, and mental and physical health provided by greenfrastructure. However, anecdotal evidence from the popular media highlights the presence of gathering—the harvest and collection of wild and semi-cultivated plants or fungi from urban forests—in many US cities. Further, contemporary greenfrastructure analyses potentially overlook important cultural, economic, and ecological values associated with the gathering of urban forest products, such as food, medicines, firewood, and craft materials. Indeed, the invisibility of urban and peri-urban gathering, both in contemporary and historical park management arenas, reveals the extent to which this practice may represents an ongoing challenge to dualistic framings of nature in parks ("nature"/culture, work/leisure, urban/rural) that characterize the “urban imaginaries” contained within urban planning practices. Despite the anecdotal evidence that gathering exists in urban areas, there has been little academic study of this practice. First, drawing on case studies from Seattle, Philadelphia, and New York City USA, we use key informant interviews to demonstrate the diversity of species that people gather; the people who gather; reasons they gather; and places that are important for finding valued species. In doing so, we detail the characteristics of locations sought, legacies of past land-use and management, and the challenges gatherers face. Second, through historical document analysis we demonstrate a historical continuity in planning discourses and practices that primarily view urban parks and associated forests as sites of recreation/leisure and humans as destroyers of "nature", rather than viewing parks as sites of work and extraction and humans a part of and co-producers of "nature". This research challenges planners and landscape historians to re-examine the work done in and place of nature in urban parks and planning discourses.

KEY WORDS: Landscape history, peri-urban fringe, urban ecology, urban political ecology, green urbanism, NTFPs.