

Views From the Park Bench: *Local Treasures*

Chances are, your city park is where neighbors gather, lasting friendships are made, and families reconnect. We can't imagine life without them.

By Jay Walljasper



How does owning a vacation house at Yosemite sound? Or a beach cottage near the shores of Acadia National Park? Do you dream of hiking the Grand Canyon right outside your front door, or taking a dip in Crater Lake after getting home from work?

This is not some far-fetched fantasy of zealots who want to privatize our national parks. Actually, it's a pretty close description of my own modest home—and probably yours, too.

Let me explain. I live just a few blocks from Lake Harriet, a national treasure where I swim and cross-country ski, walk in the woods, and spot bald eagles soaring through the skies. And all of this happens right in the middle of inner-city Minneapolis.

Lake Harriet, you see, is a city park, part of Minneapolis's cherished Chain of Lakes. But chances are good you've got something similar near your own home. It may be a wading pool and woodpeckers instead of a lake and eagles, but it's no less of a treasure.

A city park is your Yellowstone—a spot to relax and reflect and revel in nature, as well as enjoy a picnic or shoot hoops. City parks can also be the neighborhood version of New York's Times Square or Washington, D.C.'s National Mall, gathering places where you run into friends and feel a part of the action.

The local park is often where we celebrate local festivals, play sports, attend community meetings, join classes, and marvel at fireworks on the Fourth of July.

I believe that local city parks—even humble ones with only a playground, flower patch, Little League diamond, or bench beneath a tree—are part of our birthright as Americans, every bit as much as our majestic national parks.

This is not intended in any way to minimize the wonder of our national or state parks—especially now that many of them face serious issues of upkeep and diminished funding. I will always remember the childhood thrill of clamoring across a snow field during August high up in Rocky Mountain National Park, or learning to body surf as a teenager at Cape Cod National Seashore.

Even as a seasoned travel writer on assignment for *Better Homes and Gardens*, I was spellbound by the experience of seeing a bison herd up close at Custer State Park in South Dakota. Each year, my family and I count the days until our annual trek to the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in northern Wisconsin, which I have come to look upon as a restorative retreat as much as a summer vacation.

Yet these are once-in-a-lifetime—or, at best, annual—peak experiences. Lake Harriet and Minneapolis's other fine
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parks are wonders that I can visit every day. And I often do, walking the dog after breakfast or biking around the lake in the evening.

These parks are where my son's soccer team plays spring, summer, and fall; where he learned to ice skate, sled, and ski; where he organizes capture-the-flag tournaments; and where his eighth-grade graduation ceremony will take place.

My wife, Julie, and I visit Lake Harriet three times a day when the cherry trees and lilacs are in bloom, and we sit

out on a blanket to hear jazz, folk, Latin, polka, and classical concerts at the band shell throughout the summer. We make a ritual of long family walks on Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, then join with other families on New Year's Day to stomp through the snow for a short but sweet cookout on New Year's Eve.

Lake Harriet is part of the fabric of my life, woven through my memories and daily rhythms. I wouldn't trade it for anything, not even a seven-bedroom beach house with the Atlantic Ocean

lapping at my front door in Acadia National Park.



Jay Walljasper is a writer and speaker focused on how a sense of place can enhance our communities, environment, and soci-

ety. He is author of *The Great Neighborhood Book* and a senior fellow at Project for Public Spaces. E-mail: jay@jaywalljasper.com.

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