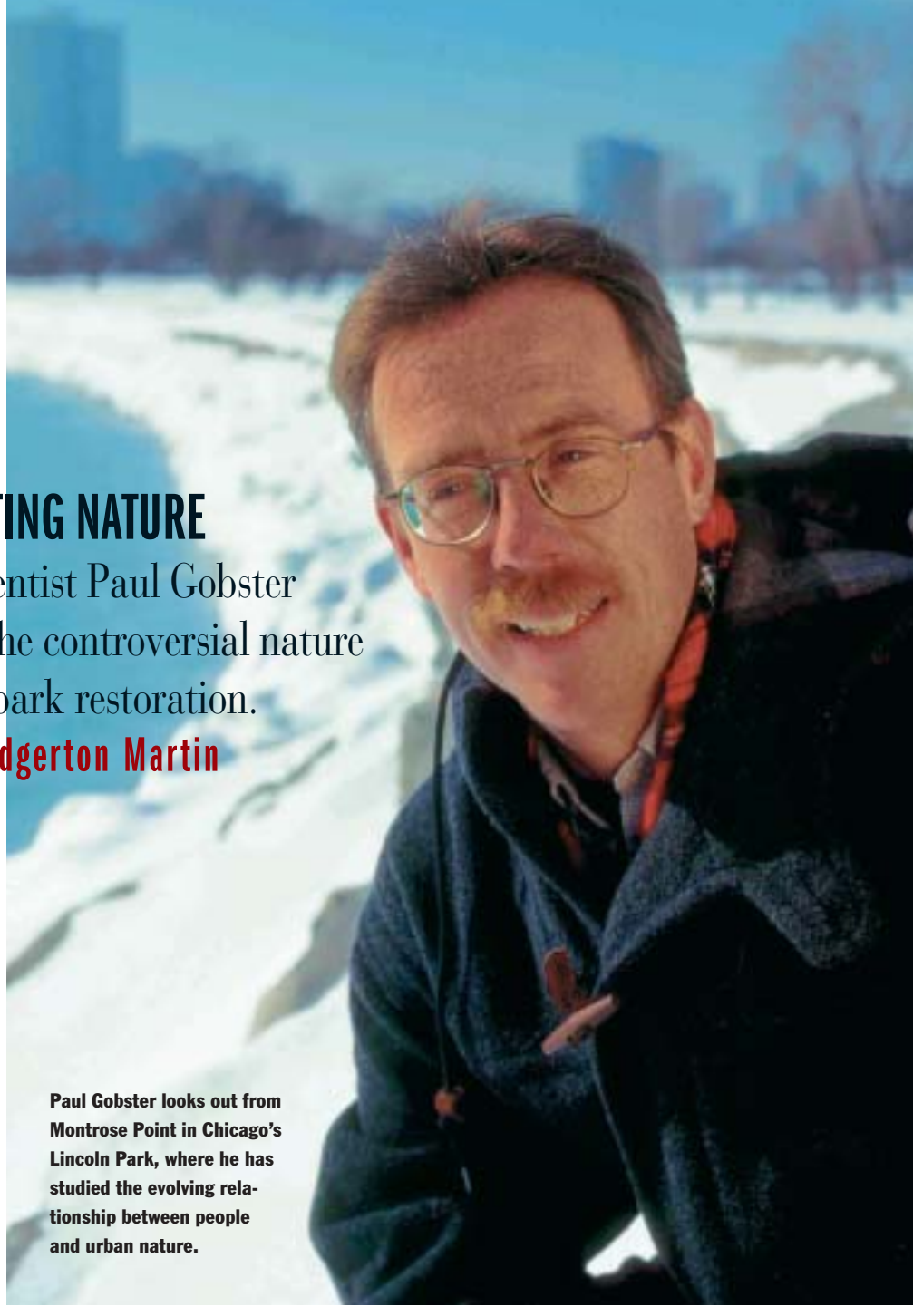
NEGOTIATING NATURE

Social scientist Paul Gobster explores the controversial nature of urban park restoration.

By Frank Edgerton Martin



Paul Gobster looks out from Montrose Point in Chicago's Lincoln Park, where he has studied the evolving relationship between people and urban nature.

URBAN PARKS OFTEN SPARK more passionate public controversies than vast wilderness areas, partly because diverse urban constituencies have very different understandings of just what urban "nature" really is.

That's what Paul Gobster, ASLA, has learned from 20 years of studying nature at all scales as a social scientist for the USDA Forest Service. Gobster continues to provide leadership in landscape perception research with innovative studies that merge quantitative and humanistic, open-ended research approaches to human perception. As a social scientist based at the Forest Service's North Central Research Station in Chicago, Gobster addresses pragmatic questions for resource managers, but he also probes theoretical issues about nature and the ways that people value it. His studies include analyses of use of trail and greenway corridors (and people's perceptions about them) and of urban park use by diverse racial and ethnic groups.

Much of Gobster's recent work focuses, however, on social conflicts arising from the restoration of natural areas in urban parks. In 1996 he began studying emerging opposition to native landscape restoration projects in the forest preserves in and around Chicago. The deep feelings of various stakeholder groups in response to change in the forest preserves surprised him, Gobster says.

By definition, true ecological restoration would require a return to the prairie, savanna, and wetland communities that existed around Chicago before European settlement. Yet many park users understand nature as being the forests that have grown up in the preserves over the decades.

In a study of Montrose Point—an 11-acre extension of Chicago's Lincoln Park designed by noted Prairie School landscape architect Alfred Caldwell and built in 1938 on a landfill in Lake Michigan—Gobster found a recent plan to restore nature to be culturally, socially, and historically complex. To protect Chicago during the height of the Cold War, the Department of Defense sited a Nike missile base in Lincoln Park. To obscure the security fence, a hedge of nonnative honeysuckle bushes was planted. When the base was removed, the hedge ran directly across one of Caldwell's important designed spaces. Yet the remnant Cold War honeysuckles attracted many birds—and the birding community. Eventually, this nonhistoric and nonnative hedge became known as the Magic Hedge for its abundance of berries and habitat. Although in strict historic landscape preservation terms the hedge lay outside its period of significance, removal would not be so simple.

Gobster's research has explored the many cultural subgroups at Montrose Point, including historic preservationists interested in the Caldwell legacy and ecologists who want the landscape to evoke a "primeval setting" even though it is on a landfill. "In many ways the concepts that we use for restoration don't apply to urban settings where the landscape is artificial to begin with," Gobster says of Montrose. What is the baseline original from which to start, he asks? And how can one realize and help negotiate a shared vision of nature in an enormous, diverse, and outspoken city?

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In studying the Chicago restoration controversy, Gobster realized that the debate was essentially a "wicked conflict," a term he uses to describe a deep, value-based conflict such as the ones over the spotted owl, snowmobiles in national parks, and oil drilling in Alaska. Because urban parks are "places that are valued by a diversity of people for a diversity of reasons," Gobster says, they are particularly fertile grounds for wicked conflicts. "Things really start to get interesting when you have a lot of people crammed together debating small sites," he says. "While many values are expressed in conflicts over urban natural areas, I still think that aesthetics is the primary thing that drives people, whether they're restorationists or adjacent homeowners. It's just that the multicultural reality of urban society means that there are many definitions of nature."

Driven by user research and a participatory planning framework, Wolff Clements Associates' final design for Montrose Point, *above,* blends concerns for bird habitat and native plant diversity with passive recreational use and a respect for the original 1938 landscape design by Alfred Caldwell. One of several small hilltop parks in San Francisco, Bernal Hill, *bottom,* exemplifies the challenges of restoring critical urban natural areas that are also in demand for a variety of other uses.

Gobster sees such debates over urban nature happening all over the country. In the spring of 2004, he temporarily moved to the outspoken San Francisco Bay Area as the Beatrix C. Farrand Visiting Distinguished Professor of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning at UC-Berkeley.

In 1995, San Francisco established a Natural Areas Program to protect and restore native plant communities in city parks. The program—which in some areas has replaced introduced vegetation such as eucalyptus trees with native forbs and shrubs and restricted recreational access to some slopes and other ecological restoration sites—faced mounting opposition from stakeholder groups such as those advocating off-leash dogs and tree protection. Gobster conducted interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, made field observations, and collected a diverse mix of archival data from news articles, published reports, web sites, and listservs.

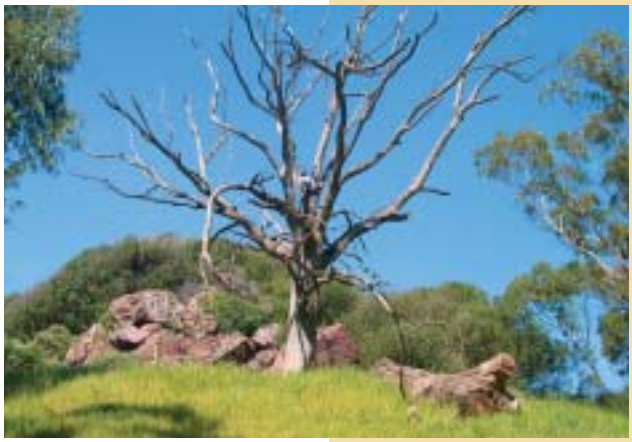
"The parks that are contested tend to be hilltop parks that are built into neighborhoods, like Bayview Hill near Candlestick Park," he explains. They are often small yet cherished sites, such as on Bernal Hill, where neighbors visit regularly and have a sense of ownership. In addition to getting a more solid understanding of stakeholder issues and values, Gobster's research is helping him to piece together a rich story about the interaction of people and nature in urban areas.

CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT, TOP; U.S. FOREST SERVICE, BOTTOM

"As landscape architects and as social scientists, we really have to ask whether we deal with landscapes simply on the basis of social preferences," Gobster says. "Is there a way to also incorporate a more humanities-based approach that recognizes experiences and other knowledge-based forms of appreciation?" In the case of urban natural areas, he jokes, "a lot of the conflict we see boils down to multiple values, with diverse stakeholders duking it out over finite space in a city." It's obvious he believes that there will never be one solution to resolve such wicked conflicts, just as there is no one research method that can be used to study complex issues.

GOBSTER GOT HOOKED on landscape research at the University of Wisconsin when he was studying for his MSLA. Building on the efforts of the late Ervin Zube and the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture, the department founded *Landscape Journal* as the field's first peer-reviewed research journal. Within this atmosphere, Gobster's thesis on perceptions of lake houses stood as an exemplar of valid and reliable student research. He continued on at Wisconsin to earn a PhD from its Institute of Environmental Studies.

Gobster explains that Zube, during the course of his career, moved from a very broad and synthetic designer's approach to rigorous statistical analysis and then back, later in life, to a synthesis of many disciplines in landscape research questions and methods. His remembrance of Zube published in *Landscape Architecture* in August 2002 serves as one of the most accessible summaries of Zube's remarkable career.



Not native but not forgotten. Some landscape features, such as the large eucalyptus trees in San Francisco's Bayview Park, have aesthetic, symbolic, and even sacred value for some people, and attempts by ecological restorationists to remove these "discordant" icons meet with stiff opposition.

Gobster's new work is about how parks, trails, and other urban open spaces can facilitate active living in the context of everyday city life. He is finding that people love the contrast of nature and urban architecture and that they are drawn to places with multiple sensory experiences such as fragrances, the sound of birdsong, and the chance to walk.

"My work in Lincoln Park shows that people love the trees and the grass, but they also love the backdrop of the skyline. The contrast between the two is a beauty greater than either. We have also found that people love old bridges in the city." Although urban "nature" will always remain problematic in definition, cities contain a lot more of it than people realize—in small ravines, under bridges, and along railroad tracks. People are drawn to these pocket settings for many reasons including dog walking, hiking, soli-

Reducing Stakeholder Conflicts in Urban Natural Areas

Paul Gobster and his colleagues offer landscape architects advice for planning and public participation processes in contested urban settings. These and other recommendations are detailed in the anthology Restoring Nature: Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities *(Island Press, 2000), an ASLA Research Merit Award recipient.*

Provide "cues to care" for urban restorations.
When undertaking ecological restoration of urban parks, continue to manage areas near homes, picnic groves, recreational trails, and other highly used or visible areas relatively conservatively. Keep native restorations in these areas small scale. Consider mowing instead of burning, and leave noninvasive, nonnative trees to live out their days. Mowed edges, the planting of showy native perennials and interesting trees at key locations, fencing, and other "cues to care" can improve the appearance of restorations. This user-friendly approach to restoration may help speed the development of an aesthetic appreciation for urban natural areas. Leave more intensive or larger-scale restorations for more remote areas.

Promote two-way communication.
Efforts to educate the public are doomed to failure if proponents of natural areas are not also open to listening. Facilitated negotiation techniques such as joint fact-finding can help parties work through conflicts if they are willing and open-minded. Including a wider range of groups in the planning process can lengthen planning time and sometimes modify outcomes, but it often speeds up implementation and management in the long run.

Respect diverse values.
The values people hold for nature are diverse and may not always be compatible. This may be especially true in urban settings, where the population is often culturally diverse and where natural areas take on special importance because they are limited in extent. While natural-area proponents might argue that there is an ecological imperative for removing nonnative trees to protect a rare native species or plant community, critics might charge that doing so is no less arbitrary than preserving the trees to maintain air quality or provide visual screening. Instead of arguing whose values are better, a more constructive way to proceed would be to respect the legitimacy of these multiple values and work together to achieve the common goal of protecting nature.

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tude, romance, and play. These are settings backdropped by buildings and highways, industrial complexes, and rail yards. Though they are not "nature" as defined by Aldo Leopold or Teddy Roosevelt, urban nature allows for human expression and the simple act of going outside in an increasingly mediated world.

For landscape architects, the question is how can we connect these pockets to larger open space systems? And how can we encourage greater diversity in activities and interpretations of such vestiges? Can we begin to understand urban nature as something that is inherently social? "If people can incorporate landscape experience into their city lives," Gobster says of his recent work with urban recreation, "it can have a lot of benefits." LAM

In a participatory process that began with initial planning studies in 1991, the Chicago Park District has transformed Montrose Point from a barren space, *above left,* to a richly vegetated natural area, *above right.*

Frank Edgerton Martin is a writer, campus planner, and regular contributor to Landscape Architecture.

Resources

For further details and a listing of Paul Gobster's studies, see *www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/people/Gobster.*