

City dwellers find wilderness closer to home

By Will Doig, Salon

Since 1979, Eddee Daniel has been hiking Milwaukee's Cambridge Woods, part of an 800-acre swath of wilderness now called the Milwaukee River Greenway. Back then, the forest, which cuts straight through Wisconsin's most crowded ZIP code, was largely shunned by the public. "There were vandals and drug dealers," says Daniel. "It's changed in a big way, and mostly in a healthy way."

Today, on any given summer weekend, the Greenway teems with hikers, canoers and mountain bikers. But it's still more wilderness than anything, with few of the accouterments of an organized park. In it, you can see one of modern urbanism's most unexpected traits unfolding: a renewed appreciation for wild space in cities – not just "green space," but actual swamps, forests, wetlands and streams.

Part of this is the result of changing demographics – the growing number of "urbaneers" dragging kayaks into aqueducts, the same city dwellers who prompted REI to open a giant store in Manhattan. But it's also part of a growing realization that the earth's natural processes can be harnessed in ways that benefit even the most urbanized area.

Tim Carter, director of the Center for Urban Ecology at Butler University, talks about these benefits as "ecosystem services" – ways that mother nature can help cities by doing what she does anyway. For example: "We've typically used pipes to drain our urban lands of water," says Carter. "But a more highly engineered wetland could do the same job as greener infrastructure." Los Angeles has been experimenting with this. In February, it opened its second engineered wetland in South

L.A., a boggy, weedy marsh on the site of a former MTA bus yard. Pools of rainwater filled with naturally occurring bacteria scrub storm water clean before it makes its way to city drains. The spot doubles as a park, even as it serves its practical purpose.

Read the whole story