In a city as densely packed as New York, green space has always been a prized commodity. Though famous for its exemplary parks—Central, Prospect, Bryant, to name a few—New York has a population density more than double any other city in America, with the exception of San Francisco. This translates to just 4.6 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, below the national average of 6.1 acres for high-density cities. In such a congested metropolis, making a connection to the natural world can be challenging. Which explains why so many New Yorkers reacted with such outrage when, in 1999, the city planned to auction off more than 100 community gardens.

The Trust for Public Land has been involved in the community garden movement since 1978, supporting local efforts by offering supplies, training, and expertise, as well as permanently protecting gardens as public space. Throughout the five boroughs, TPL has worked with more than 220 community gardens. Today, TPL owns and helps steward 70 of these pocket green spaces, creating opportunities for the more than eight million people who call this bustling city their home to escape to the tranquility only nature can provide and come together as a community.

Though these efforts conserved most of the gardens involved years ago, TPL...
In Chester, New York, a walk around the park just got a lot longer.

With the purchase of the 149-acre McNeill Farm, a picturesque former dairy operation and hay farm, visitors to Chester Commons Town Park will soon have easy access to the 1,500-acre Goosepond Mountain State Park, where hiking trails and bridal paths traverse the heavily wooded landscape.

Located in Orange County, one of New York’s fastest-growing counties, Chester is home to 13,000 people. With the help of The Trust for Public Land, which negotiated the sale from the landowners to the State of New York, area residents, along with a new generation of nature lovers, will now be able to enjoy more open space.

“The purchase of the McNeill property protects an important resource for the Town of Chester, Orange County, and New York state,” said New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Commissioner Carol Ash. “The property is in the New York State Highlands, next to an important protected natural area and connects a large state park to a very active town park. This expansion will give Chester residents, especially its children, access to both an active recreation park and a passive-use natural area.”

Indeed, it’s the children, over 100,000 of whom live in Orange County alone, that may stand to benefit the most from this expansion. In an interview with TPL last year, Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children*...
Notes from the Field
Finding a Green Lining

New Yorkers across the state have endured a lot of difficult news in the past six months. The economy has moved toward a recession, and the real-estate market is flagging. The New York State budget faces a deficit crisis, and the dreaded snakehead—the air-breathing fish that slithers across land and is capable of wiping out most other fish populations—was found breeding in Ridgebury Lake and Catlin Creek in Orange County.

At the same time, there is a recognizable green lining to this gloom. Governor Paterson has expressed his commitment to smart growth, and for the first time in years, real estate prices have slowed their sky-high ascent. These factors allow organizations like The Trust for Public Land to better use public dollars for conservation acquisitions.

Properties that normally have price tags beyond the reach of anyone other than major developers may now be possibilities for conservation. In the past six months, TPL has acquired nearly 1,500 acres for public parks in Orange, Rockland, and Delaware counties. Looking ahead, we have a healthy project pipeline and anticipate announcing the acquisition of several more parklands across the state in the coming months. And, happily, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation successfully stopped the snakehead infestation in Orange County. Our work goes on.

From Nature-Deficit Disorder, pointed out that at no time in our history have children been so out of touch with nature. Competing interests such as television, computers, and school activities have kept them from communing with the outdoors. Yet nature plays a very important role in our well-being.

According to Louv, “Nature can be powerful therapy for depression, obesity, and attention deficit disorder.” It increases the ability of children to concentrate, and studies show that it also promotes creativity. But it’s not only children who are affected. Louv says that “nature-deficit disorder” also “affects adults, neighborhoods, whole communities, and the future of humankind’s relationship to nature.”

With the rolling meadows of McNeill Farm enhancing the panorama of the newly expanded park, there will be no deficit of nature in Chester.
Protecting the Urban Oasis (continued from front page)

On West 128th Street in Central Harlem, a garden acquired from the city was conveyed to the only multisite neighborhood land trust currently operating in the five boroughs, the Reverend Linnette C. Williamson Memorial Park Association. This garden was developed in 1995 on the site of the city’s first vest-pocket park, established under Mayor Robert Wagner in 1965. Shortly after the garden was started, housing was proposed for the site. The Harlem community mobilized to preserve it as a garden to be owned by the association. The city agreed to not develop the land, and TPL was brought in to successfully pass ownership of the garden to the association.

On East Fourth Street, TPL secured two-thirds of the lush oasis known as Parque de Tranquilidad from the city in 1999. This summer, thanks to the efforts of TPL and some very generous private donors, the garden’s privately owned center lot was permanently protected after 29 years of on-again, off-again negotiations. This minipark is arguably the best example of the design work of the late urban garden pioneer Liz Christy, of the Council on the Environment of New York City. Christy is widely known for starting the first New York City community garden in 1973 at Bowery and Houston streets, now named in her honor. TPL expects to convey the entire garden to the Manhattan Land Trust in 2009.

The fight to save the garden oases of New York is now largely a matter to be left to the history books and the memories of so many outspoken, involved New Yorkers. Today, residents and tourists alike can reap the reward of these labors by visiting one of hundreds of community gardens. To find a garden near you, visit tpl.org/nycgardens.

New York State Projects Completed

Between April and October 2008, thanks to your ongoing support, TPL completed projects that included the protection of 596 acres of wilderness and the construction of two new playgrounds, where more than 2,500 neighboring schoolchildren now play.

Frank Sansivieri I.S. 73 Community Playground
Location: East Harlem, New York
Lead Funding: Office of the Manhattan Borough President, Credit Suisse
Community Sponsor: East Harlem Tutorial Program

Torne Valley
Size: 495 acres
Location: Ramapo, Rockland County
Stewards: Palisades Interstate Parks Commission, Rockland County

Wassaic/Paparazzo
Size: 101 acres
Location: Amenia, Dutchess County
Stewards: Conservation Buyer, Dutchess Land Conservancy

Central Park East Community Playground
Location: East Harlem, New York
Lead Funding: Office of the Manhattan Borough President, Credit Suisse
Community Sponsor: East Harlem Tutorial Program

For information and reservations contact: Hilary Mulcahy 510-444-1451 trips@tpl.org www.tpl.org/trips

2009 TPL Trips

April Cruising Paradise, U.S. Virgin Islands
June Alaskan Inland Passage
July Hooked on Trust in Montana
July Aspen Summer Sojourn, Colorado
August A Northwest Passage, San Juan Islands
September Cycling Old New England, Maine

Travel with TPL!
Roosevelt Island: A Window to New York’s Past, A Park for Its Future

No one ever said open space planning was easy. On Roosevelt Island, it’s hardly a walk in the park.

Sitting between the shores of Queens and Manhattan in the middle of the East River, the narrow strip of land now called Roosevelt Island has a varied and interesting history. In the 1660s, the Dutch purchased the island from Native Americans and renamed it Varckens Island, or Hog Island, and used it primarily for putting their pigs to pasture. Since then, the island has changed names and functions a number of times and even housed a penitentiary that pre-dated the one on Rikers Island. Though that structure is long gone, remnants still exist from the island’s next historic use. As Welfare Island it was devoted to citizens who were mentally or physically ill. The island was renamed again in 1973 to honor President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Plans still exist to establish a memorial on the southern end of the island, a proposal that would complement the park development work being done.

“Protecting the ruins at Southpoint Park from further deterioration will allow visitors the opportunity to see a part of New York City’s history up close.”

Andy Stone
Parks for People—New York City Program Director

Three historic remnants are now being incorporated into the development of Southpoint Park at the southernmost tip of Roosevelt—the iconic, castle-like smallpox hospital; Strecker Memorial Laboratory, which was built in the late 1800s as the nation’s first pathological and bacteriological research center; and the foundations of City Hospital, built in 1861 and demolished in the 1990s. TPL and the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOC) plan to highlight these structures as part of the $12.8 million park project to maximize the unique qualities of the site with special focus on historic preservation.

“Our work on this site is part of our mission to conserve land for people,” said Andy Stone, director of TPL’s Parks for People—New York City program. “Protecting the ruins at Southpoint Park from further deterioration will not only allow visitors the opportunity to see a part of New York City’s history up close, but it will also provide a beautiful centerpiece to the new park.”

Originally constructed in the 1850s as a hospital to treat patients with smallpox, what is now called the Renwick Ruin was designed by architect James Renwick Jr., who also designed such notable New York City landmarks as St. Patrick’s Cathedral and Grace Church. Work is now under way to permanently stabilize these ruins, which have a deteriorating facade and a recently collapsed wall.

Strecker Memorial Laboratory, though already fully restored, currently stands well off the beaten path and out of the public eye. As part of Southpoint Park, the laboratory and its history will be brought fully into the view of the public. Part of the foundation of City Hospital will also be unearthed and beautified with garden beds.

Taking into account the usual challenges involved in planning a park—securing funding from multiple sources, working with local communities to create a plan to meet everyone’s needs, finding partners invested in the idea—along with a $200,000 effort to remove 40 years of invasive vegetation, TPL and RIOC have overcome much to ensure that Southpoint Park will be a fascinating and enjoyable place for the island’s 12,000 residents and many visitors.

But at the end of it all, the reward for such an endeavor will be the park itself.

“Surrounded by water on the three sides, this is one of the city’s finest public waterfront sites,” said Stone. “Creating a park on the south end of Roosevelt Island has been a hope and dream of many for more than 40 years, and we are excited that TPL is helping to finally make it happen.”
The playground is also available after school and on the weekends for the community to use. “The school has an active community sponsor, and we knew the playground would be well-used once construction was complete,” said Reynolds, who believes the playground will provide a much-needed shot in the arm for the surrounding neighborhood to clean up and beautify their own yards.

Every day people peered through the fence and asked when it would be done, she said. “There is tremendous electric-ity in the air.”

Thanks to the industrious designers of I.S. 73, the private support of the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, and the on-the-ground support of community sponsor Maspeth Town Hall, that shot in the arm comes complete with play equipment, a running track, and, most important, a lot of smiling faces.

Instead of an asphalt lot behind their school, the 1,700 children who attend I.S. 73 in Maspeth, Queens, returned to class this fall to find a trail with native plants, a grove of trees, an outdoor classroom, a gazebo, an expansive athletic field, chess tables, reading benches, and a rock-climbing wall. This little bit of paradise is one of the 185 playgrounds that The Trust for Public Land has worked on as part of its New York City Playgrounds Program, a partnership with the City of New York.

Credit for designing this magnificent playground goes to the students. From the planning to the planting, the children were involved in every aspect. When surveyed about what they wanted to have in the playground, the students expressed a strong desire for natural elements.

“They wanted something beautiful,” said Vice Principal Gail Jerez. “For some of these kids, school is a second home.”

Besides offering an attractive place to play, the yard also enhances the curriculum and exposes the students to many different careers. Principal Patricia Reynolds said the playground provides a tremendous boost to opportunities the children may otherwise not have. The outdoor classroom, for example, gives children hands-on opportunities to interact with nature. “For many of our children, this was the first time they had ever planted anything,” said Reynolds.

Students at I.S. 73 in Maspeth, Queens, couldn’t wait to put their new playground to the test this fall. Photo by Nana Taimour

This summer, The Starr Foundation approved a $2 million challenge grant to TPL’s New York City Playgrounds Program. The funds will match dollar for dollar every donation given to the Playgrounds Program. The Starr Foundation, which has a strong interest in health care and education and is based in New York City, chose the Playgrounds Program because of a growing concern about childhood obesity in the city. “We think it is integral to the development of children growing up in urban landscapes to have a natural environment in which to play and learn,” said Courtney O’Malley, vice president of The Starr Foundation. Earning this grant is a big boost toward TPL meeting the $10 million dollar campaign goal for private funding.

To find out more about this program or to support TPL’s playgrounds work, visit tpl.org/nycplaygrounds.
Echoes From Historical & Industrial Past Help Preserve Ramapo Landmark

Legend has it that General George Washington lost his watch on Torne Mountain while spying on British troops during the American Revolution. No one knows the actual location, but today’s visitors to Harriman State Park can daydream about finding it as they hike to the summit through 495 newly protected acres overlooking Ramapo Pass.

“It’s an absolutely spectacular, gorgeous property,” enthused Jack O’Keefe, president and chief executive officer of the Ramapo Land Co., which owned the land until the end of September 2008. “The views are indescribable; there are places where you can see all the way to Manhattan, 29 miles to the south.”

Torne Brook forms the southern boundary and another tributary, flowing from the northern side of the mountain to the Ramapo River, cuts through the property. “The Ramapo River basin provides drinking water for about two million people in Rockland County and northern New Jersey,” said New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Commissioner Carol Ash. “Keeping this property undeveloped open space not only adds to the grandeur of Harriman State Park, it helps protect this vital water source.”

In addition, the forest is habitat for red-tailed hawks, great blue heron, green heron, fox, coyote, black bear, and the protected timber rattlesnake and osprey. Considering its industrial past, the area is remarkably undisturbed. In the 19th century, the Pierson family acquired land here for their Ramapo Iron Works, and at one time owned well over 5,000 acres. But today the company, now the Ramapo Land Co., is liquidating and selling off the land.

“We could have sold to someone who could have built homes on Wrightman Plateau, but the descendants of the Piersons’ preferred to come to an agreement to keep this land wild,” explained O’Keefe. Over the last decade, he periodically met with Commissioner Ash and TPL to figure out what could be done. This year, everything aligned.

“The best solution all around was to add the land to the state park, and we were finally in a position to do it,” said TPL Project Manager Philip Nicholas. With funds from the Environmental Protection Fund of New York State and Rockland County, this historic landscape will forever be conserved, and plans for development on Wrightman Plateau have finally been put to rest.

Ash is delighted. “There were many reasons to protect this property,” she said. “The historical aspects, the property’s recent industrial past, the agricultural history at Wrightman Plateau, its associations with Ramapo Pass, and the native Ramapo people that were here long before us, in addition to the natural resources and beauty of the place.”

Rich with history and full of stunning views, the 491-acre Torne Valley property was a critical priority for preservation. Photo by Clark Jones

Echoes From Historical & Industrial Past Help Preserve Ramapo Landmark

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The gender wars were waging full force at the Central Park East Community Playground opening this September with girls-against-boys tug-of-war. Funders Credit Suisse and the Office of the Manhattan Borough President celebrated the kid-designed playground, with students and community members. Find out more about New York City playgrounds work inside, on page six. Editors’ note: The girls beat the boys three out of three times. Photo by Avery Wham