

# Parks benefit community well-being, enhance London experience

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When deciding whether her family should move to London, Science Teacher Kara Anderson said she flew in to get a feel for the city. After stumbling upon Paddington Recreation Ground, she knew London would be her next home.

"I didn't know where we would live, but I came to the school and then I just walked the neighborhoods," Anderson said. "I remember sitting in Pad Rec for like an hour and just watching the people and just sitting being like, 'Yes, I could call London home.'"

The Royal Parks, 11 of the city's oldest and largest green spaces, including Hyde Park, Regent's Park and Primrose Hill, are known as "the lungs of London," according to their website. Beyond central London, parks in the northwest part of the city provide spaces for the community to find well-being in nature locally.

## Favorite parks in London

When she has nothing to do after school, Annika Gilbert (27) strolls just 10 minutes from the school to hang out with friends in St. John's Wood Church Grounds.

"We walk around and get something to eat on the High Street," Gilbert said. "It's a place where I can socialize and talk with my friends if I am feeling down."

Just east of St. John's Wood, Gilbert said she also frequently visits Primrose Hill, which brings back memories of when she lived in the surrounding neighborhood.

"When I was younger, we lived near Primrose Hill, so it's a sentimental place for me," Gilbert said.

Anderson said she loves bringing her dog to Russell Square, which is close to where she lives and provides her dog space to run around.

"It's awesome because she can go off-leash in Russell Square, and she loves to run and chase us," Anderson said. "She never otherwise gets off-leash ... so, it's really special to see like her ears do the flapping and our whole family loves to take the dog for a walk."

Beyond Russell Square, Anderson said her daily walk home through Regent's Park allows her to enjoy nature and reflect on her day.

"I'm often walking through the park, like processing the day, but like thinking and planning and like getting ideas as I walk through," Anderson said.

Furthermore, because Regent's Park is a public space, Anderson said she has unexpectedly run into her students, mostly from her Ecology Expeditions class, on her walks.

"One day I was trying out a new app, the LeafSnap app, so you can take different pictures of a leaf, and a student the next day said 'I think I saw you in the park!'" Anderson said. "I was like, 'Oh, I must have missed you' and they were like, 'You were looking at a leaf. Like yep, that was probably me.'"

Visual Arts Teacher Erik Niemi said while his family was out of their house due to renovations, Hampstead Heath gave them the opportunity to bond while exploring the outdoors.

"The Heath has been a real kind of refuge for us," Niemi said. "We've used it... just for family time to get out and walk around and explore and our kids have really taken to that and really gotten excited about being in nature and being on the Heath regularly."

Niemi said he loves seeing his two kids, ages 6 and 3, feed their curiosity about nature and interact with it as a way of understanding the world. He said they have begun exploring nature creatively without him explicitly directing them to.

"They both just went off and kind of explored their own thing," Niemi said. "One was knocking stones into a kind of rabbit piece of wood and against the pattern. The other one was like picking mushrooms and looking for sticks ... It was like a nature playground. We didn't design it, it's just there."

Despite moving away from Northwest London, Health Teacher and Sustainability Council Adviser Mariam Mathew continues to visit Gladstone Park regularly.

"I often find myself going back for a few reasons," Mathew said. "There's a path of trees that are just beautiful, and every time I even just walk there I feel better ... It's like you take a deep breath and feel the oxygen come in."

Mathew said Gladstone Park attracts a wide range of visitors due to the various activities and opportunities made available for Londoners there, including her and her daughter.

"The park also has a sports area, so lots of pitches and things like that for people to play sports, but then this other area for more like walking dogs and playgrounds," Mathew said. "It's nicely divided to give people different things for different purposes ... more recently, my daughter, since

I have a young child now, I love taking her to the playgrounds, and she just loves that."

Nicholas Abadie Capel (26) said he mainly finds himself spending time in Regent's and Hyde Park due to their convenience and spaciousness.

"I mostly visit Regent's Park because it's really close to my house, but I feel like I visit Hyde Park more often," Abadie Capel said. "It's more like a weekend family hang-out area. It's nice and big, and so there's lots of space."

While comparing Gladstone Park to Regent's and Hyde Park, Mathew said its distinctive traits stand out to her.

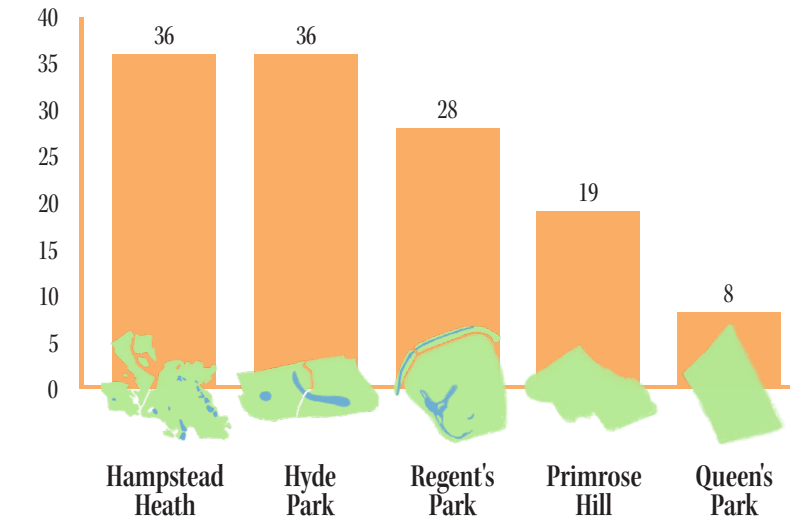
"It's very local, so it's not like a ton of people know about it," Mathew said. "It's big enough to sort of manage all of the needs of the community, so those of us who know about Gladstone Park, you know, we're big fans."

Regarding the parks' impact on his mental and emotional well-being, Capel said he views parks as areas that improve his health.

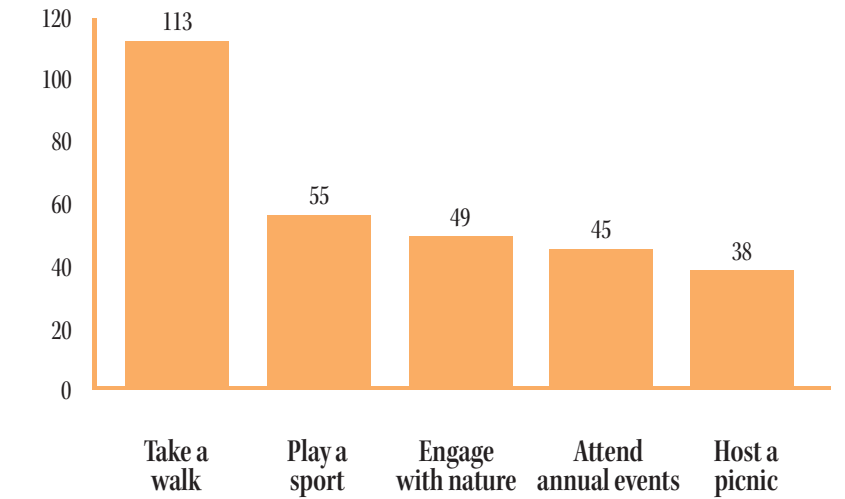
"It really helps de-stress," Capel said. "Nature is literally the most natural way to decompress. Like, it's just something about being in nature. It kind of feels like you're just surrounded by positive energy from the greenery."



## Top 5 parks



## Top 5 activities to do in parks



Data collected from an online survey conducted by The Standard Oct. 23, 2023 to Feb. 17 with 153 student and faculty responses

## London in comparison to other cities

Niemi attributed his love for exploring nature to growing up in Portland, Oregon, which is surrounded by greenery.

"There's this love of nature in Portland, which has some of the largest urban parks, which are essentially just forests in the city," Niemi said. "I used to go and explore them all the time, so that's just part of my upbringing."

Wherever he moves, whether it be North Carolina, Seattle, New York City or London, Niemi said he always takes advantage of the available parks.

Anderson, who lived in Chicago before moving to London, said Chicagoans interact with nature less compared to Londoners, which she attributed to the lack of public parks in the city.

"In Chicago, there are not as many green spaces," Anderson said. "If you live in certain neighborhoods, you have access to some of them, but the other parks are super small and more playground-y parks. I don't know if people get out as much."

Anderson said she sees Londoners interact with nature much more.

*"You'll want to learn more about nature if you feel like you have a stronger connection to nature."*

— Science Teacher Kara Anderson

"From my lived experience, I'm impressed with how many people are out at the parks," Anderson said. "Primrose Hill, whenever we go there, we see so many people out. Pad Rec, people out."

Despite having enjoyed her time living in New York, Mathew said the city lacked green spaces in comparison to London.

"New York has Central Park, which is stunning and gorgeous and wonderful, but it's sort of like the strip right in the middle of Manhattan, and then the rest of Manhattan is a lot of concrete jungle with just these little corners of green every once in a while," Mathew said. "It doesn't feel as spread out, like you don't have as many of these wonderful, wild green spaces like you do in London."

Mathew said she is impressed by London's abundance of green spaces and parks considering it's such a large metropolis.

"It's a really amazing thing to see in a city, especially one that's always growing like ours," Mathew said. On the other hand, Capel said he prefers Central Park over

Hyde Park, although it's a difficult decision when considering Hyde Park's Winter Wonderland, an annual Christmas event held during the winter season.

"Honestly, I love New York, so I have to say my favorite is Central Park, but just soon after that is Hyde Park," Capel said. "Hyde Park is really nice to just walk around. Oh, also because it has Winter Wonderland. Oh my gosh, if they did that in New York, that'd be awesome."

## Nature interaction in curriculum, extracurriculars

Anderson teaches the Ecology Expeditions class at the school in which students prepare for a trip to South Africa in the spring. In order to encourage her students to engage with nature in advance of the trip, Anderson organized field trips in August and September to local parks in London, including Primrose Hill and Regent's Park.

"One of the things that I, in my preparation for teaching the class, really thought about is to get intrinsic buy-in for students caring about nature and thinking about nature," Anderson said. "You'll want to learn more about nature if you feel like you have a stronger connection to nature."

Moreover, Anderson further inspired Ecology Expeditions students to spend time in nature through a homework assignment where students had to write in a nature-noticing journal.

"I had them journal for a week and encouraged them to try to be in spaces or when they walk through green spaces, to take a picture," Anderson said. "We would share out in class and a lot of people found a lot of value in pausing and slowing life down to notice nature more."

When reflecting on the Sustainability Council's presence at the school, Mathew said she realized the council overlooks their own engagement with green spaces and nature.

"I don't know that I've explicitly encouraged [interacting with nature], and that actually makes me think that it's something that we should have more conversations around," Mathew said. "Usually, we see our role as helping the community find ways to engage more with nature...but, we've not actually talked about how to use those green spaces ourselves."

Mathew said the Sustainability Council's goals connect to the significance of parks because it advocates for their preservation.

"When people care about something, they want to save it," Mathew said. "If we can get people to care about the fact that we need more green spaces, we need to protect the ones that exist, we need to engage in those spaces as much as we can, then we feel like they're worth fighting for."