Preface

Definitions

It would be nice to begin the book with a clear definition of terms and subject matter but like many aspects of landscape work the boundaries, both biological and cultural, of what may be classed as 'urban nature' blur at the edges and defy neat semantics.

The very concept of **urban nature conservation** in itself can seem like an oxymoron. Nature conservation does not imply a blanket desire to care for or direct resources into promoting the survival of all and any other living species. Conservation needs to be a focused activity that addresses those species which are under some sort of threat or decline. In the majority of cases such threats are ultimately attributable to human activity including habitat destruction and urbanization. Those species that have been able to find a niche in urban areas are normally tolerant of human disturbance and are experiencing an increase in habitat range rather than a decline.

Nevertheless urban nature conservation has grown in importance and richness as a theme over the recent decades. From origins earlier this century as a Cinderella subject, largely ignored by professionals, scientists and policy-makers, we now see a widespread interest in the topic as well as an established body of information that has arisen from a few active academic researchers and more widely from committed individuals and urban naturalists. Many of the organizations, governmental and non governmental, charged with biodiversity protection now include urban programmes in their work.

The managers of urban land need to understand the priorities and issues that have driven this expansion of concern, and which set implicit and explicit goals for the management systems. Much of this book therefore is a review of what nature conservation really does mean in an urban context, and what the implications are for the professionals.

What about the terminology that is used to identify those areas where this aspect of landscape management has a priority? A recent definition by some of the leading UK researchers in the field classifies **natural greenspace** as:

> Land water and geological features which have been naturally colonized by plants and animals and which are accessible on foot to large numbers of residents (Harrison *et al.*, 1996).

For example, data gaps are an inevitable problem, and make the task of setting policy priorities a matter of professional judgement. Often therefore, decisions are made on the basis of subjective preferences by the conservation staff. Wider issues of global biodiversity protection are substituted at a local level by a debate about the type of wildlife that the nearby community will value contact with, so that fierce battles can be fought over the protection of species which, in national or international scientific terms, have very little conservation significance. Of course it can be argued that by promoting contact with and awareness of local wildlife, the wider cause of global nature conservation is served. By extension local authorities and other organizations need to be seen to be acting in a local way with the same ethics of care that we would want to see globally.

With very few exceptions urban nature areas **are** devoid of species that are in any way endangered or that justify direct protection. (There are certain notable exceptions which will be discussed in more detail later.) Urban nature conservation therefore presents a particularly interesting distillation of certain aspects of the biodiversity conservation debate, where priorities and interests, successes and failures, are fought out in an arena devoid of clear indication of what really **is** the best thing to do. Discussion of these aspects too will form part of the substance of this book.

Finally, by focusing this book on ecological types of landscapes there is no intention to underrate the importance of the more formal and more ornamental parts of the urban scene such as traditional flower borders; these areas are an equally fundamental part of town and city greenspace, they give great pleasure to many people and, at their best, they are works of art. They are also not as devoid of wildlife interest as is often assumed, although this dimension is rarely taken into account in the management objectives. In places the text will discuss the relationships and potential conflicts between these two paradigms of open space management.

A tremendous amount has been done to raise the understanding of the need for wild areas in towns, but in many cases local authorities still seem to feel that designating certain areas as reserves or ecoparks is sufficient. The reality is probably that the basic framework of the urban landscape should be managed along naturalistic lines, with formality and intensive maintenance being reserved for areas where it seems clearly appropriate. A Groundwork survey of the St Helens area found that half of all the greenspace in the area consisted of fertile but species poor, regularly cut, rye grass swards (Figure P.1). Another quarter was fertile grassland that is uncut and becomes a coarse tussocky sward dominated by grasses like yorkshire fog and prone to summer fires. Director of the Trust at the time, John Handley, pointed out 'no one denies the need for traditional amenity grassland in Knowsley, but there is just too much of it' (Handley and Bulmer, 1987).

On the other hand it is essential that the supporters of ecological landscapes recognize when the style is not appropriate. They need to respect other people's tastes and identify the valid role for ornamental landscapes and exotic plants in society. The development of an ecological approach need not mean that the other functions of open space have to be sacrificed.

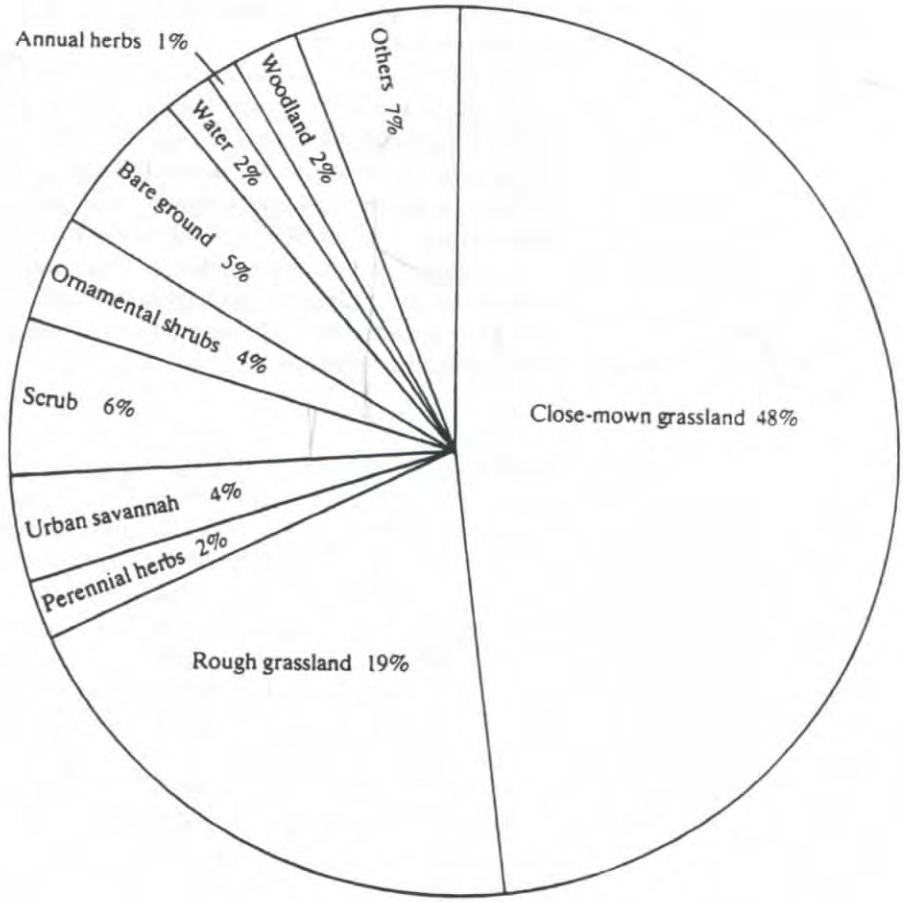

Figure P.1 The make-up of urban greenspace in St Helens (Handley and Bulmer, 1987). This chart illustrates the degree to which featureless grassland dominates the urban landscape.

The role that land plays in our lives can be very complex; it can fulfil many needs.

Our ancestors began gardening by making small changes to the natural landscape they saw around them. A move towards ecological styles should not mean turning our back on everything that we have learnt since then; it means using that knowledge and that understanding in a way which is just as sophisticated as any other style of cultivation, combining the lessons of horticulture with those of ecology.

Open space should bring joy and delight, an extra, and very special, dimension to the urban environment. There should be sunlight and shade, colour and flowers, sounds, scents and perfumes. Turning a park into an ecological area should not mean that we have to compromise these pleasures. It should provide all of these things and more. It should be a place where there are more delights, more sounds, more colours and more scents – not just the scent of flowers but of hay and the fallen leaves, the sight of dragonflies dancing in the sun, the colours of fungi emerging from the litter beneath

the trees, the sparkle of spider webs in the fog, the sound of bees humming around heather.

Excellent texts already exist which detail the richness of the urban countryside and also address the techniques available for protection of the habitats that are found or created, and there is no need to reproduce the detail of these here (see for example Gilbert, 1989; Baines, 1986a; Goode, 1986). However, with a few notable exceptions much of this research and information is still at the stage where people are documenting what is there, how it has developed and what are the maintenance options rather than attempting a synthesis of principles that will guide landscape management and policy formation at a more strategic level. This text attempts to move towards such a synthesis.