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Good Afternoon. Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and distinguished Committee members. My name is Ken Leinbach, the Executive Director of the Urban Ecology Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be with you today.

The purpose of this testimony is to introduce the Interior & Environment Appropriations Subcommittee to a successful 20-year experiment in Milwaukee, Wisconsin that is capturing the attention of cities and urban landscapes across the country as a replicable non-profit model. The Urban Ecology Center (UEC) uses environmental education as a way to transform challenged urban parks and neighborhoods. The Urban Ecology Center aligns with the goals and mission of programs under the jurisdiction of the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Department of the Interior, (specifically the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service).

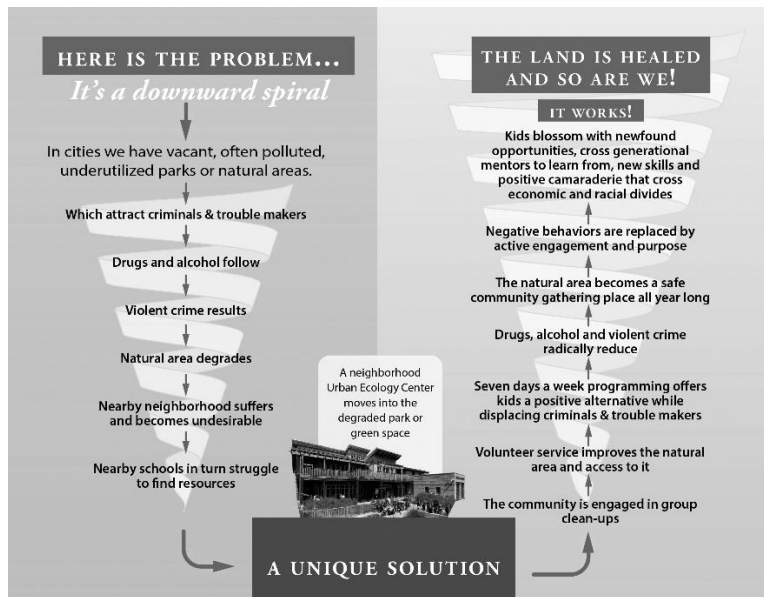
Most environmental issues are the result of many small actions adding up to bigger problems. We need the common, everyday person to understand that their actions matter, and that every action they make has an impact. In short, we need everyone to care about the environment, not just a few.

Armed with this mindset 20 plus years ago a few of us discovered research that identified two consistent commonalities in the early life of those who cared about the environment: consistent access to the natural world and having a mentor or an interested adult or friend who demonstrated respectful behavior toward the land and toward the environment as a whole. If interested, the research is entitled "Significant Life Experience" research and was first put forth by Dr. Louise Chawla in a research review article dating back to 1998. Richard Louv popularized and expanded on this research in his more recent book *Last Child in the Woods*.

The Urban Ecology Center emerged after an extensive national search for programs based on this research resulted in no matches. The UEC is an experimental social invention that brings kids and adults alike into contact with nearby nature while fostering mentorship and role modeling. The experiment is working.

While our goal started out as a strategy to improve ecological literacy of folks in a city, when a Center is placed in an urban park so much more happens! The parks become safer, student academic achievement improves, new jobs are created, job training occurs, volunteerism explodes, property values improve, and, if done correctly, a significant influx of community resources and engagement happens. In total, over its 20 year existence, the Center has

catalyzed over \$45 million in direct investments in and near the parks that we occupy. It is a unique way to stabilize urban neighborhoods, and now, 20 years later, cities all over the nation and world are interested in replicating our model.



The mission of the Urban Ecology Center is quite simple. Connect people who live in cities to nature and each other. The Center started with this mission in Milwaukee in the late 90's, operating out of a humble trailer in a high crime park in one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the state of Wisconsin. We started as a small group of science teachers, offering field trips to nearby schools. We discovered quickly that learning science can be a passport to a different world. From the micro level changes in cells, to understanding our place in the ecosystem, experiences that offer these "aha" moments change one's view of the world.

Traditional nature centers have done an excellent job of raising public awareness, preserving green space, and introducing children to nature largely in suburban and rural areas. The Urban Ecology Center builds on the success of this model by viewing green space as more than recreational space or an educational laboratory but as an anchoring community hub around which neighbors come together to build community and healthy neighborhoods. The Center's model combines environmental education with community engagement through a wide range of activities including hosting community events, field trips, lending outdoor equipment, and welcoming volunteers to help with land stewardship and research projects.

The Urban Ecology Center's place-based strategy in urban areas reaches a diverse audience—all ages, racial backgrounds, socioeconomic standings, political leanings and, perhaps most importantly, people with a variety of perspectives and opinions on environmental issues. The Center has been supported equally by all sides of the Wisconsin political spectrum.

The Center's continuum of educational and recreational programming helps urban children to explore the natural world right in their own neighborhoods. From innovative urban habitat

restoration to an efficient and effective approach to environmental education for all ages, the Urban Ecology Center is a proven model for transforming communities by revitalizing urban green space.

The Urban Ecology Center strives to create a community where all of our children can be transformed by nature. Based in Milwaukee, the Center operates three environmental education sites where there are more than 100,000 people living, and more than 40 schools operating within a two-mile radius of each site. For our children, environment-based recreation and education is beneficial in every major way -- intellectually, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and physically. Entrance to the Urban Ecology Center is free and the Center is open nearly 365 days a year, providing youth with a safe, engaging environment in their out-of-school time.

Through the Center's innovative and engaging programming urban children are provided with the opportunity to learn, explore and discover in green spaces right in their own neighborhoods. Annually, the Center achieves the following:

- Over 225,000 visits by youth and adults learning and growing in natural spaces at our three branches on Milwaukee's Southside, West Side and Eastside.
- Increased academic knowledge and skill by program participants.
- Increased ecological literacy and environmental ethic by program participants.

As a learning organization, the Urban Ecology Center values evaluation as an important tool for both internal program improvement and accountability to the community. The Center is interested in both the depth and breadth of program impact on participants and the community. These measurement tools include quantitative and qualitative components to ensure that outputs and short-term benchmarks are being met and to measure the progress toward reaching long-term goals.

The Urban Ecology Center is actively engaged in building a city where urban children can explore and be mentored in the natural world. The Center builds outdoor laboratories where people of all ages can come together, building curiosity and respect for nature. To date, measurable impacts include:

- 99% of teachers reported that the Center's school partnership, the Neighborhood Environmental Education Project (NEEP) improved students' academic performance.
- The Center is directly responsible for the restoration of 70+ acres and have been the catalyst for hundreds of acres of preserved and restored land along the Milwaukee River Corridor and the Menomonee River.
- Crime is down 90% in Riverside Park since the introduction of the Urban Ecology Center. The parks are used nearly 365 days of the year, creating a continuous community presence.
- The Center partners with 60+ local schools through the Neighborhood Environmental Education Project with a 95% retention rate year after year.

- Over 3,400 volunteers contribute more than 24,750 hours annually.

On Earthday, 2018, the Center published the book *Urban Ecology: A Natural way to Transform Kids, Parks, Cities and the World* while at the same time launching the Urban Ecology Center Institute. The institute provides a training option for the many inquiries that the Center now receives from cities across the nation and world. The Grange Insurance Audubon Center in Columbus, Ohio was based on the Urban Ecology Center Model. Atlanta Georgia, Rochester New York and Denver Colorado are all in the process of creating such Centers, while many others have sent representatives to our workshops. On the international front Tiberius Israel, Medellin Colombia, Monterey Mexico to name a few are engaged in our training program.

In addition to urban environmental education, urban land restoration has become a core competency of the Center. We have worked with the US Forest Service in creating a 40 acre "Children's Forest" or Arboretum out of old industrial land, as well as another 26 acre park on the south side of Milwaukee from an old rail yard. The first was a \$9 million environmental remediation project and the second was part of a \$25 million project. We were grateful to receive nearly a million dollars of funding from the Great Lake Restoration Initiative the first year of its inception to help remediate a mile of tier one waterways into the Great Lakes along the Milwaukee River.

From all of this work our motto has become "heal the land and the land heals us", while our tagline is "So much Life!" based on how much new life abounds in the parks that we occupy, both human and natural. We offer this introduction to you today in hopes that you might assist us in finding additional partnership and funding opportunities to help accelerate the growth of similar centers across this beautiful country that you oversee and perhaps even in your own communities.

In closing, I invite each of you to tour and see first-hand the work of the UEC. I know some of you will be in Milwaukee this July for the Democratic National Convention and would be happy to host you at your convenience.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I'm more than happy to answer any questions you may have about our mission and work.