



ROCK CREEK
CONSERVANCY

Revitalizing Rock Creek Park
THE NEXT 125 YEARS

Rock Creek Conservancy Green Ribbon Panel

- Lisa Alexander** Executive Director, Audubon Naturalist Society
- Doug Barker** President, Barker + Scott Consulting
- Hedrick Belin** President, Potomac Conservancy
- Mark Buscaino** Executive Director, Casey Trees
- Jim Foster** President, Anacostia Watershed Society
- Denis Galvin** Board, National Parks Conservation Assn.; Dep. Dir., National Park Service (fmr)
- Rachel Goslins** Exec. Director, President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities
- George Hawkins** Chief Executive Officer and General Manager, DC Water and Sewer
- Jerry Johnson** CEO and General Manager, Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission
- Lori Kaplan** President and CEO, Latin American Youth Center
- Greg Kats** President, Capital E
- Isiah Leggett** Montgomery County Executive, Montgomery County, Maryland
- Stephanie Meeks** President and Chief Executive Officer, National Trust for Historic Preservation
- Michelle Moore** Chief Executive Officer, Groundswell
- Eleanor Holmes Norton** U.S. Congresswoman, District of Columbia
- Ari Novy** Executive Director, United States Botanic Gardens
- Audrey Peterman** Founding Director, Earthwise Productions
- Carter Roberts** President and CEO, World Wildlife Fund
- David Rogner** Executive Director, Harvest Collective
- Lex Sant** Managing Director, Persimmon Tree Capital
- Chris Van Hollen** U.S. Congressman, Maryland
- Tommy Wells** Director, District Department of the Environment
- Edward O. Wilson** Professor Emeritus, Harvard, Pulitzer Prize winning author

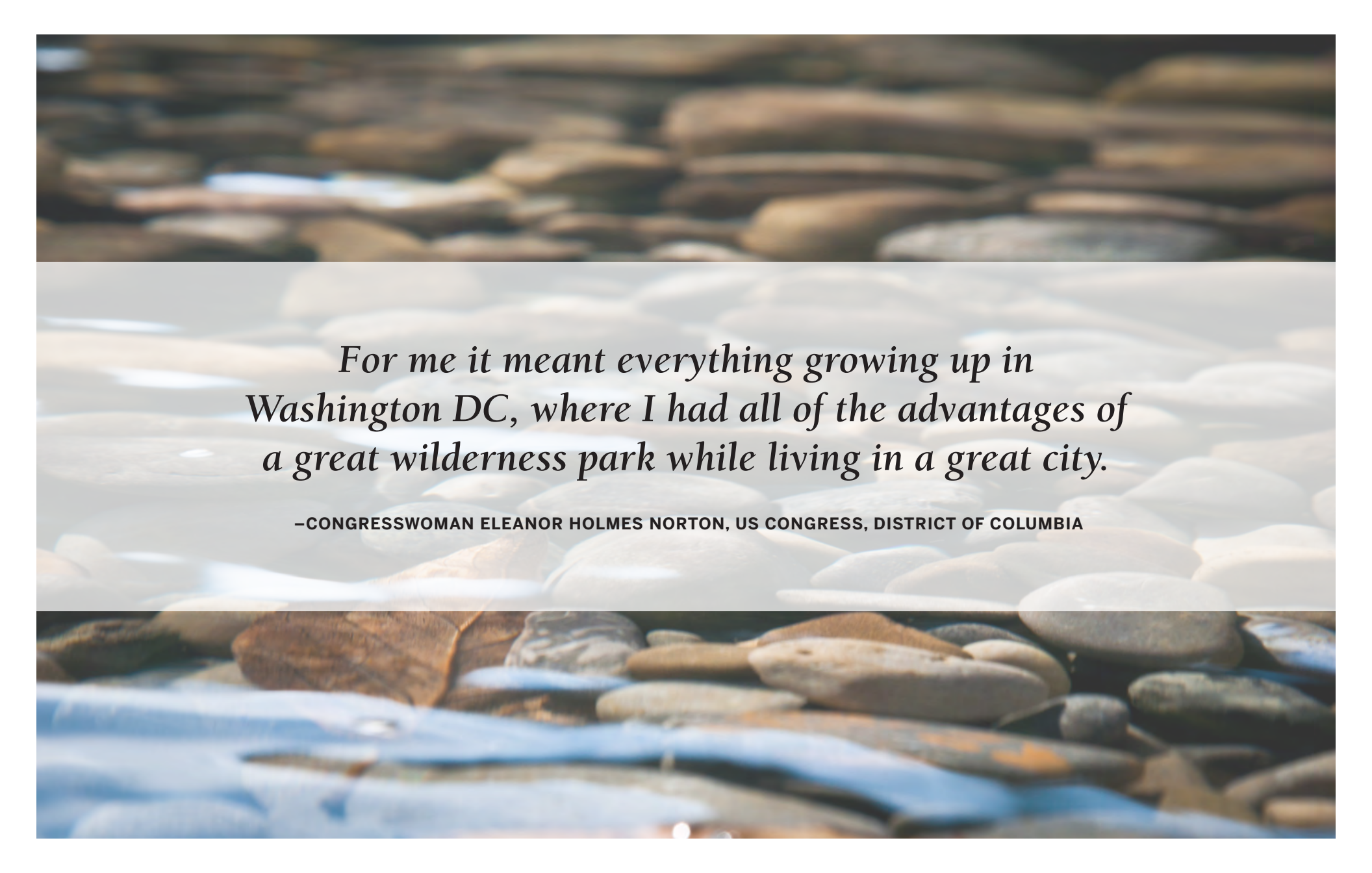
Cover photograph by Susan Austin Roth

Rock Creek Conservancy

Matthew Fleischer, Executive Director

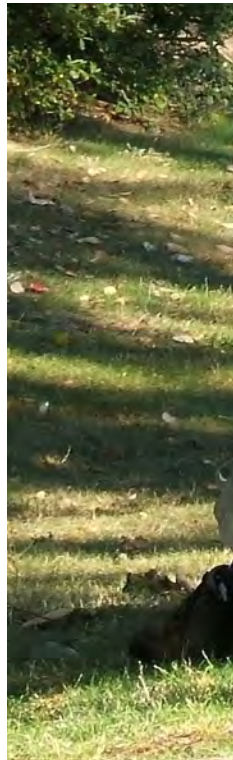
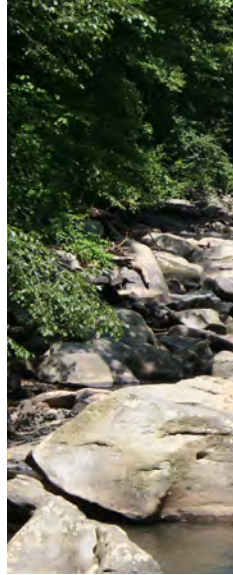
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The Washington Post



*For me it meant everything growing up in
Washington DC, where I had all of the advantages of
a great wilderness park while living in a great city.*

—CONGRESSWOMAN ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON, US CONGRESS, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA





Rock Creek Park—an iconic national park in the heart of Washington, DC—celebrates its 125th anniversary this year. Created by Congress in 1890, it is the country’s first protected federal land in an urban setting. It remains one of its largest, encompassing nearly 2,000 acres that bring nature, history, and beauty into many city neighborhoods.

The park’s features range from the Civil War earthworks of Fort Totten in Northeast to a one-room former schoolhouse in the Palisades; they include a small planetarium near Military Road and the magnificent new Georgetown waterfront landscape. An estimated two million people visit the park annually for recreation and pleasure, testimony to its importance to the quality of life in Washington, D.C.

Rock Creek can be a model urban park, contributing to the human and ecological health of the city. It has the potential to be a ready-made science classroom and laboratory. It should welcome and be relevant to all residents and visitors.







Yet Rock Creek Park does not enjoy the level of funding and attention that a major park in the nation's capital deserves. Over the past 50 years, important features of the park—natural, historic, and cultural—have deteriorated or fallen into disrepair. Though park visitation is increasing overall, facilities have been closed or operating hours reduced. Many wooded sections of Rock Creek are almost barren or overrun by invasive vegetation. Ranger services today are at token levels, diminishing once-vibrant programming.



Funding Flat After 15 Years

The good news is that Rock Creek Conservancy and other citizen-led groups have joined with the National Park Service to reverse this pattern of decline. The Conservancy's efforts include:

Clearing destructive English Ivy vines from all trees in the entire core of Rock Creek Park

Expanding trash clean up sites from 10 to 80 sites and doubling the number of volunteers

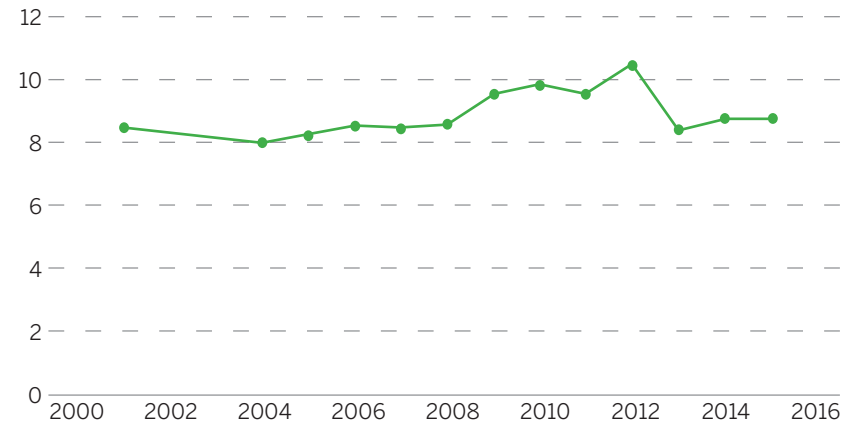
Introducing neighborhood backyard habitat improvements to benefit wildlife and stream health

Spearheading important restoration projects following the historic Olmsted and Lady Bird Johnson beautification plans

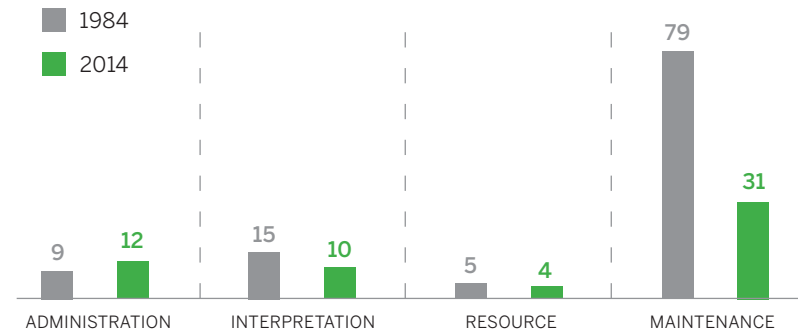
Successfully advocating for plastic bag fees to reduce trash in the creek

Supporting the "daylighting" of the Broad Branch tributary of Rock Creek, in which a quarter-mile piped segment of the stream was brought to the surface, creating eight acres of wooded and aquatic habitat

**ROCK CREEK PARK BUDGET
2001 – 2015 (MILLIONS)**
in constant 2015 dollars



**TOTAL STAFFING CUT
NEARLY 50% OVER 30 YEARS**





Elsewhere in the park, friends groups and the Park Service can point with pride to:

PEIRCE MILL—locked and quiet for almost 20 years, the historic Mill is grinding grain again and educating schoolchildren about American technological innovation.

MERIDIAN HILL (MALCOLM X) PARK—restored Italianate fountains and cascading step pools in the formerly crime-ridden gardens are safe and welcoming and drum circles pound out messages of hope.

DUMBARTON OAKS PARK—uncovered and replanted after decades of neglect, the naturalistic park was designed by America’s first professional female landscape architect, Beatrix Ferrand.

PINEY BRANCH STREAM VALLEY—newly thriving with 300 new oaks, maples, hollies and other native trees, the valley invites family picnickers, hikers, and bike riders.

KLINGLE HIKER-BIKER TRAIL—Work has begun to transform a poorly-situated road into a new access route to the Park.



Much more is needed.

The 125th Anniversary inspires us to envision an even greater park by identifying and addressing the critical needs of Rock Creek. Creating new facilities and transforming Rock Creek into a showpiece urban green space for the 21st century will be expensive—Rock Creek Park faces a \$46 million backlog in delayed maintenance alone—it will require years of patient work, plus a willingness to explore new approaches to park management.

Rock Creek Park

BY THE NUMBERS



RECREATION

Miles of Unpaved Trails

36

Community Gardens

9

Tennis Courts

30



RESOURCES

Picnic Groves

31

Boathouses

2

Amphitheater

1



HISTORY

Historic Statues, Memorials and Plaques

33

Historic Buildings

24

Civil War Forts

9



WILDLIFE

Fish Species

40

Bird Species

180+

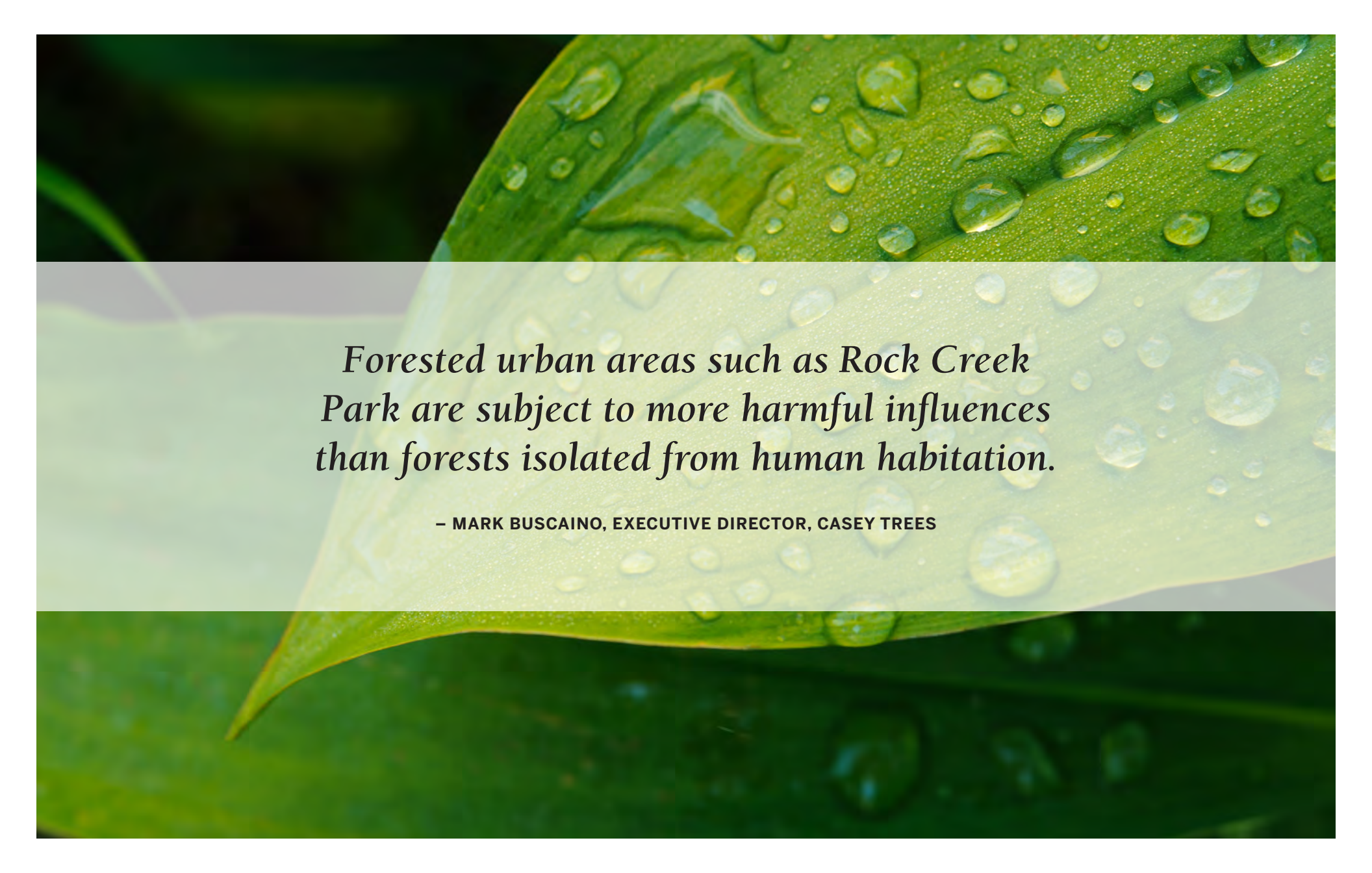
Flowering Plant Species

700+



An Agenda for Rock Creek Park

These recommendations are based on an in-depth Green Paper study prepared by Rock Creek Conservancy that lists the issues facing Rock Creek and outlines steps to protect natural and cultural resources, enhance the experience of park users, and improve access for all visitors no matter where they enter the park.



*Forested urban areas such as Rock Creek
Park are subject to more harmful influences
than forests isolated from human habitation.*

– MARK BUSCAINO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CASEY TREES



Tree Stewardship

Close to an entire generation of key species such as oak have been lost in Rock Creek Park to deer predation or smothered by rampant invasive plant growth. Many parts of the park no longer have the layers of vegetation required for successful bird reproduction. In 2013, the National Park Service began a management program to reduce the deer population to a level that the forest can sustain. A tree stewardship plan would:

ASSESS the condition of all trees in the park and **CREATE** a comprehensive plan for new plantings of canopy and understory trees, and shrubs.

IMPLEMENT a volunteer-based or paid employment campaign to plant new trees and monitor the health of the existing canopy.

SUSTAIN the restoration and beautification plan with a native plant nursery located in the park that can economically replenish the stock of trees, shrubs, and wildflowers.



Like residents of the District of Columbia, Marylanders, too, are committed to preserving Rock Creek Park. We want to make sure it's a vibrant place for another 125 years.

– CHRIS VAN HOLLEN, U.S. CONGRESS, MARYLAND



Wildlife

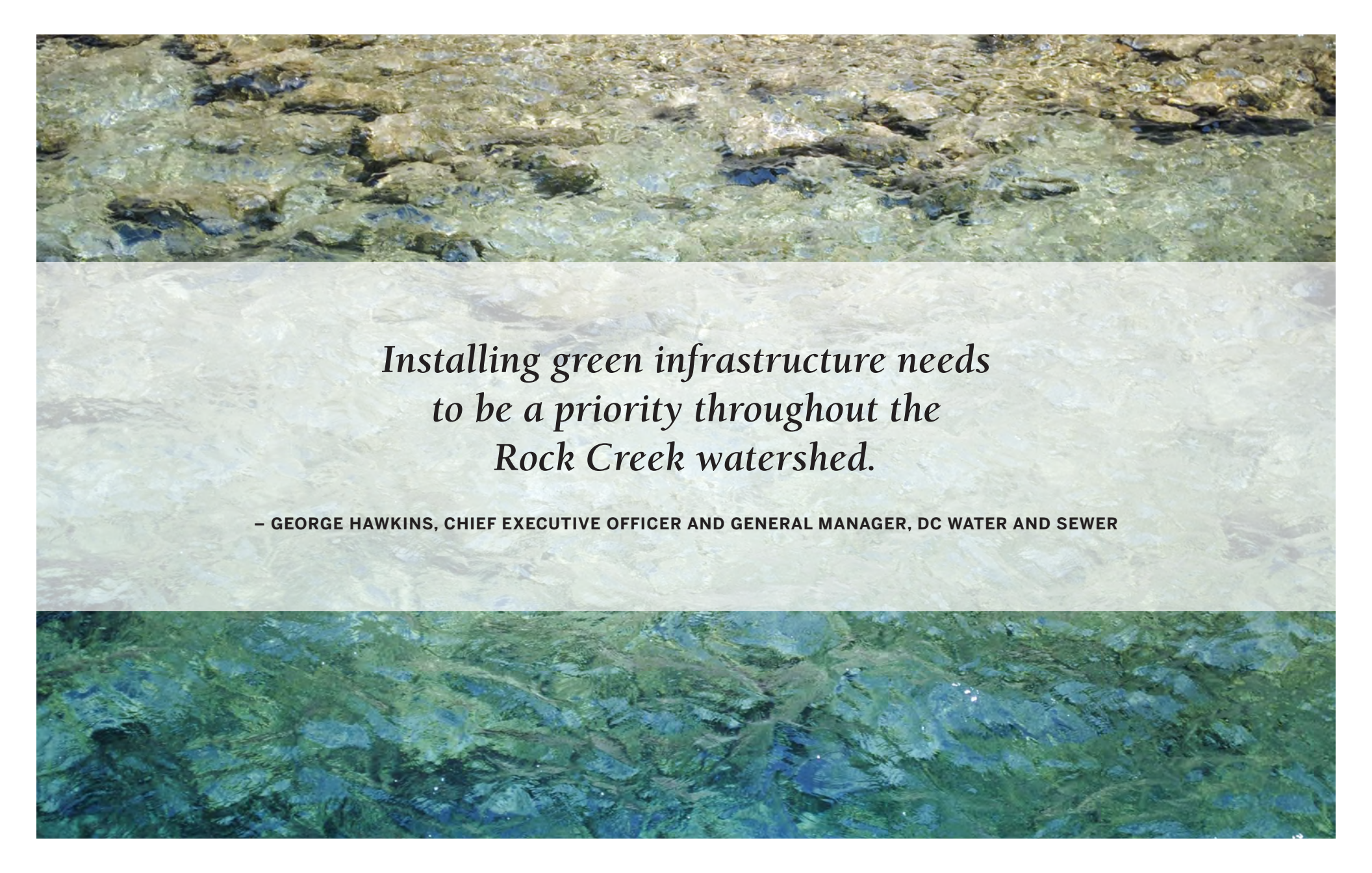
In the middle of a major city, people can catch a glimpse of wild turkey, blue herons, or red fox; hear the beautiful song of the wood thrush or hoot of a barred owl; and watch the migration of blueback herring. Actions to protect these animals and their habitat would include:

Stronger **ENFORCEMENT** of park regulations.

OUTREACH to park visitors and neighbors about the importance of keeping dogs on leash and cats indoors.

PARTNERSHIPS with research organizations to fill data gaps and develop information to improve park management decisions.

CREATION of a park neighbor program that engages nearby residents to protect wildlife and watersheds.



*Installing green infrastructure needs
to be a priority throughout the
Rock Creek watershed.*

– GEORGE HAWKINS, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER AND GENERAL MANAGER, DC WATER AND SEWER



Stormwater and Stream Life

Polluted stormwater runoff, sewage, and toxic chemical releases contaminate park streams and pose threats to fish and wildlife, as well as people and dogs. Heavy downpours lead to flooding and stream bank erosion. Options for improvement:

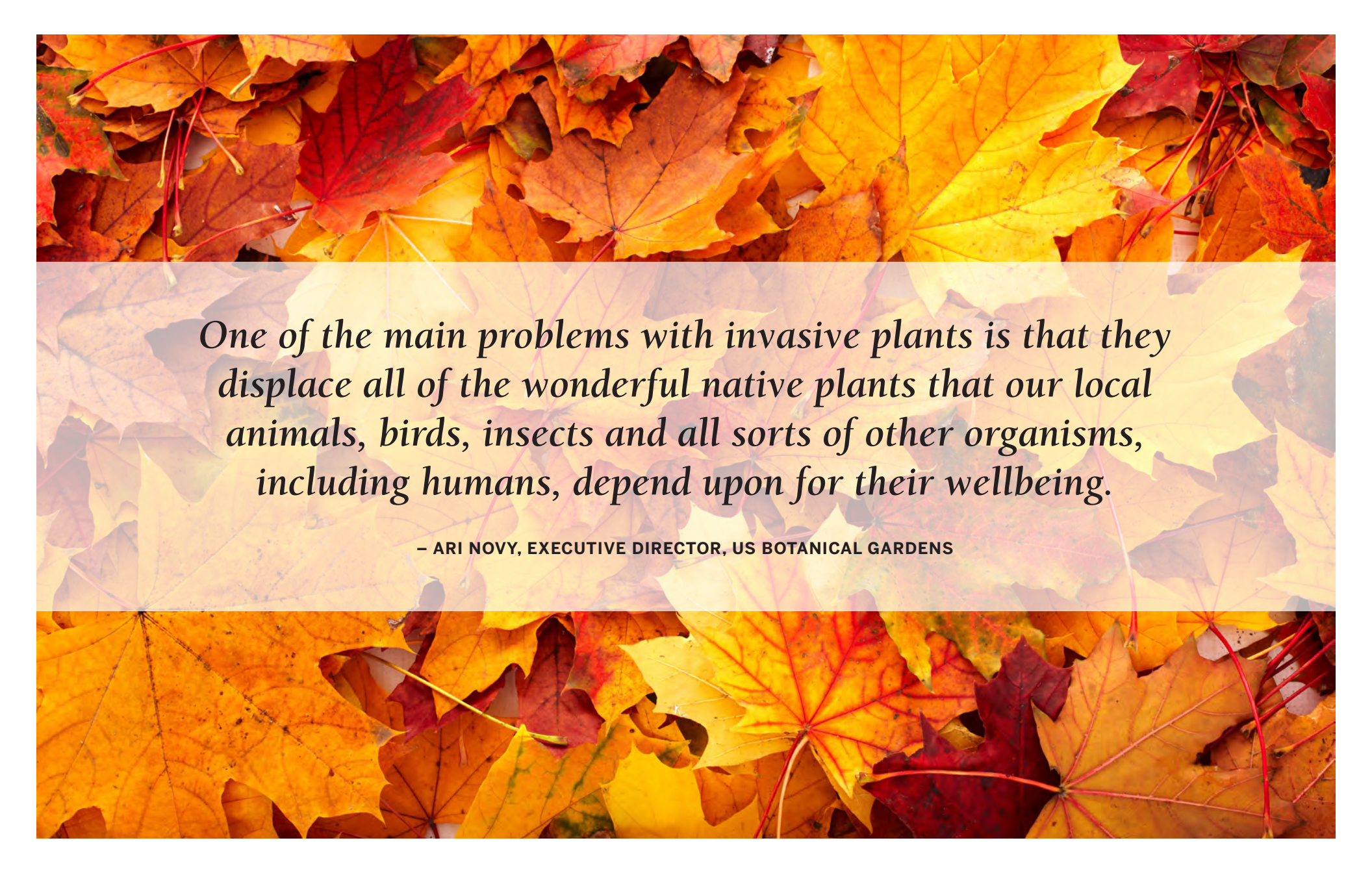
MANAGE appropriate parkland areas to capture stormwater.

REPLACE turf grass wherever possible, and **RETROFIT** parking lots with pervious surfaces and adjacent rain gardens to soak up stormwater and provide habitat.

SUPPORT DC's planned "green infrastructure" approach to lessening the impact of the city's Combined Sewer Overflow system.

PREVENT AND CONTROL SEWER LEAKS and other sources of pollution throughout the watershed.

RESTORE the park's remaining wetlands, like the spring-fed pool in Piney Branch, and re-plant water-saturated fields with appropriate wildflowers, shrubs and trees.



One of the main problems with invasive plants is that they displace all of the wonderful native plants that our local animals, birds, insects and all sorts of other organisms, including humans, depend upon for their wellbeing.

- ARI NOVY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, US BOTANICAL GARDENS



Invasive Species

Non-native vines and other plants overrun Rock Creek Park. This has greatly reduced the diversity of the park's ecosystem. The park needs a comprehensive plan of attack on the exotic species that can more effectively use volunteers and contracted personnel. This plan should:

PRIORITIZE the protection of mature woodlands and the park's most biologically diverse and important areas.

ENLARGE the Conservancy's Youth Conservation Corps as part of a green jobs program to strengthen invasive plant control efforts.

FURTHER ENGAGE park neighbors—embassies, commercial property managers, and homeowners—in stemming the spread of exotic plants into Rock Creek.



The decades of deferred maintenance and lack of funds for new initiatives have taken a heavy toll on Rock Creek Park's public amenities. The park's nature center, for example, hasn't been updated since its construction in 1960, and there is no centrally located facility to orient park visitors. The park's numerous stone picnic grills are dilapidated and in some instances unusable.

Among the steps that could make a difference in the short-term:

INSTALL a temporary or mobile visitor center.

PROVIDE snack or dining opportunities in or near the park's core. Repair and regularly clean the stone grills.

INSTALL additional water fountains and bottle filling stations.

UPDATE, repair and maintain the park's nine miles of paved bike trails.

USE VOLUNTEERS to keep bike paths clear with regular sweeping of sediment and leaves, and pruning of overhanging foliage.

COMPLETE the NPS report on the park's trail system, and undertake a volunteer-led rehabilitation of designated trails and closing of unauthorized footpaths.






In the longer term, attention should be given to

RE-IMAGINING the purpose of the largely unused Carter Barron Amphitheater, including possible partnerships to make this woodland cultural treasure an exciting entertainment venue.

CONSIDERATION of converting the Lodge Building park police substation – an attractive, rustic stone structure on Beach Drive at Military Road—into a permanent visitor center. The Park Service’s General Management Plan for Rock Creek suggested this step.

BUILDING a twenty-first century Nature Center that would be a state-of-the-art green structure demonstrating the use of energy-saving technology like solar power, innovative stormwater control solutions, and landscaping designed to benefit wildlife.

An aerial photograph of a dense forest, likely a coniferous forest, with a semi-transparent white rectangular box overlaid in the center. The text is centered within this box. The top of the image shows a dense canopy of trees, while the bottom shows the individual branches and needles of the trees.

*Public education and involvement in
discovery at our national parks are vital to
conserving our national biodiversity.*

– EDWARD O. WILSON, HARVARD UNIVERSITY



The Park as Science CENTER

The park has the potential to be both a classroom and laboratory for science. Hands-on biodiversity discovery events (including the “bioblitz”) have a special appeal for youth, and many organisms in the park remain unknown.

ENHANCE basic science education in Rock Creek Park by creating new partnership opportunities and programs. The park is surrounded by public, private and charter schools; one elementary school shares a long boundary with the park.

CONSIDER the conversion of historic park buildings to house professional scientific research.

INSTALL additional demonstration plantings, like the “Water-Wise Garden” behind the Nature Center. These can be easily added at various points around the park to inform visitors about the importance of native plants, how pavement areas can be designed to infiltrate runoff, how to design a rain garden, and other ways of using stormwater instead of automatically channeling it to storm sewers.



*One of the greatest challenges we
face in Rock Creek Park is engaging
with all of our neighbors.*

– TARA MORRISON, SUPERINTENDENT, ROCK CREEK PARK



Rock Creek Park should be accessible and welcoming to everyone who lives in, works in, or visits the Washington, DC area. Yet many people are unaware of the park's wonderful resources or how to find them. It is also physically difficult to reach the park core from some nearby neighborhoods because of its setting in a deep valley. Residents in neighborhoods facing the east side of the park are at a particular disadvantage as entry points are few, poorly maintained, and often lack directional signage.

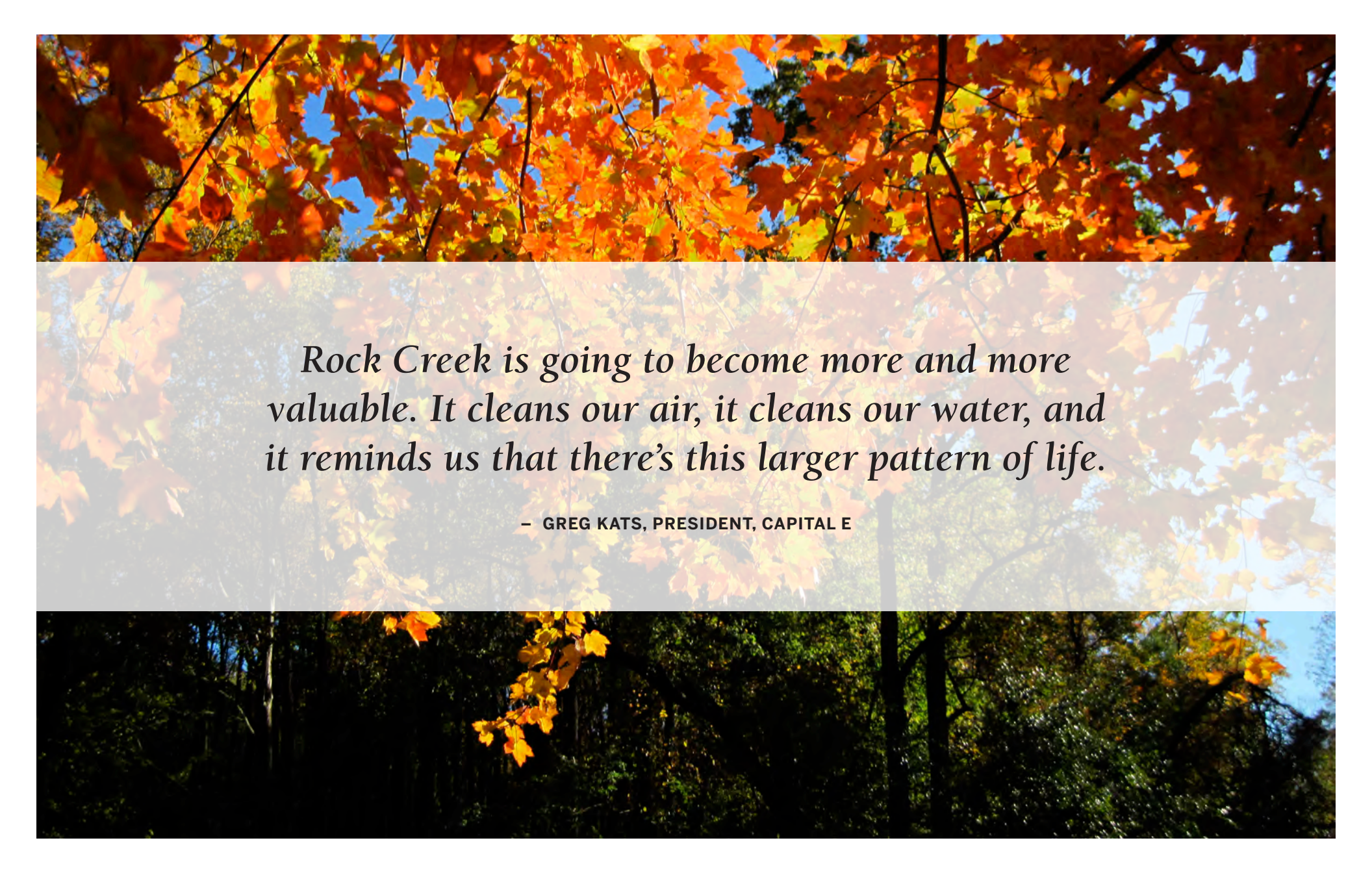
Options to help overcome these barriers and promote interest in the park include the following:

CONDUCT a comprehensive review of all trailheads to identify ways to make them more visible and inviting. Signs may be missing, set back in the woods so they are hard to see from the street or sidewalk, or obscured by vegetation.

SUPPORT a frequently updated Rock Creek Conservancy mobile app, with value-added options like nearby cafes, bicycle rental locations, and ongoing activities and volunteer opportunities.

PLACE BILINGUAL SIGNAGE near neighborhoods such as Mount Pleasant and Columbia that have large Latino populations.

CONNECT the local arts community to the park through a public arts program and "art in the park" installations with complementary arts education.



Rock Creek is going to become more and more valuable. It cleans our air, it cleans our water, and it reminds us that there's this larger pattern of life.

- GREG KATS, PRESIDENT, CAPITAL E

Great cities have great parks. Rock Creek Park faces enormous challenges yet there are many exciting opportunities for revitalization. Rock Creek Park can be a great, wild, urban park—a unique destination.

One thing is clear: the National Park Service needs committed partners to help care for Rock Creek Park and provide the experiences visitors seek. The Park Service as a whole has a \$12 billion maintenance backlog, and Rock Creek is not likely to see much in the way of increased funding in the foreseeable future.

While honoring the park's past and following government guidelines, a re-imagination of the park and its operations cannot happen without creative thinking, an openness to new ideas, and a spirit of experimentation.

Recent decades have seen extraordinary improvements by conservancies in cities such as San Francisco (the Golden Gate National Parks), New York (Central Park and the High Line), and Atlanta (Piedmont Park). Washington, DC should be on this list, as it has an inspiring history of visionary planning for and investment in Rock Creek Park. For the past 125 years, the park has provided memories, meaning and even magic to those walking its trails, savoring its peacefulness, and listening to its waters.

Rock Creek Conservancy is committed and honored to lead the effort to ensure that our park has a bright future for all in the heart of our nation's beautiful capital.



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