

Writing the Urban Landscape

Literature, Environmental Studies, & the Sustainable Future of Cities



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Research Presentation

Roanoke College

14 January 2014



Methods and Contexts:

Urbanization, environmental studies, and the practice of ecocriticism

Urban Nature:

Loren Eiseley, Leonard Dubkin, and the wilderness of cities

Reading (and Writing) the Landscape:

May Watts and the art of ecology

Future Prospects:

Literature, science, and the sustainability of cities and suburbs

Ecocriticism and Environmental Studies

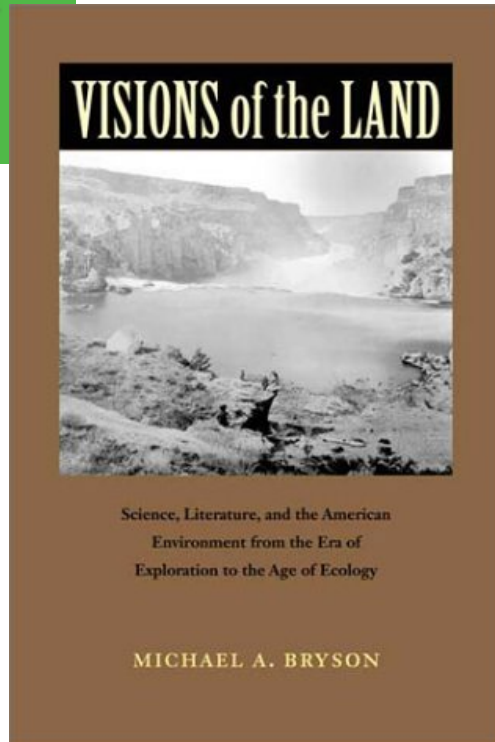


Interdisciplinary method of inquiry

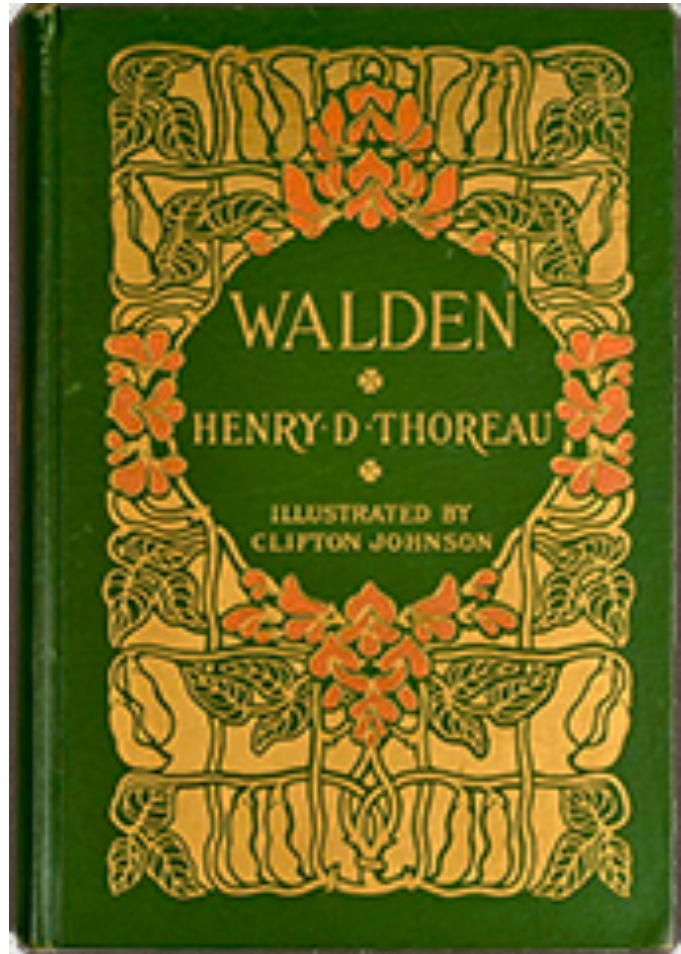
Critical interrogation of literature, film, policy, science, and all manner of environmental discourse

Part of the multidisciplinary field of environmental studies

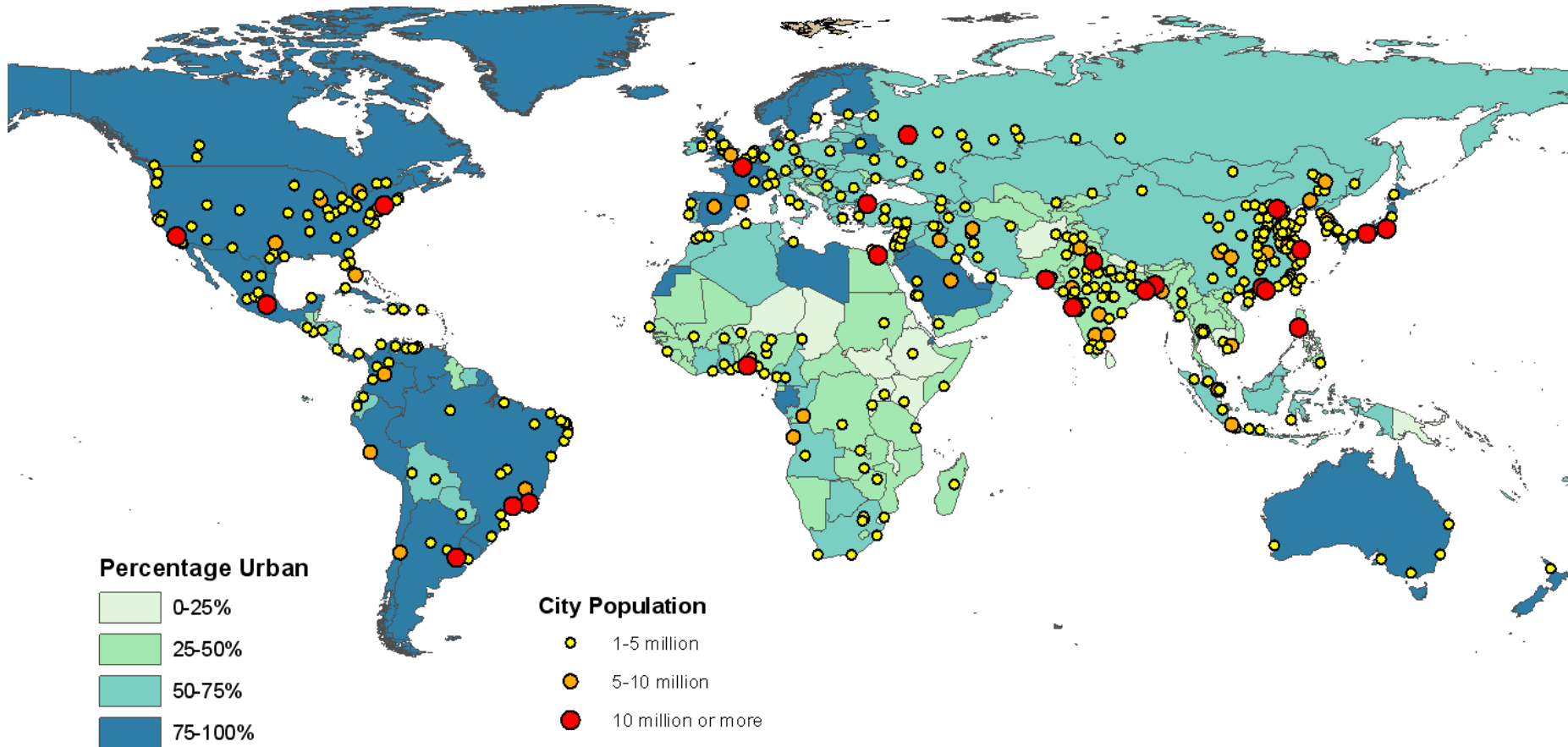
Rooted in the engagement of the arts and humanities with ecological problems and environmental issues



Ecocriticism: All the World's a Text

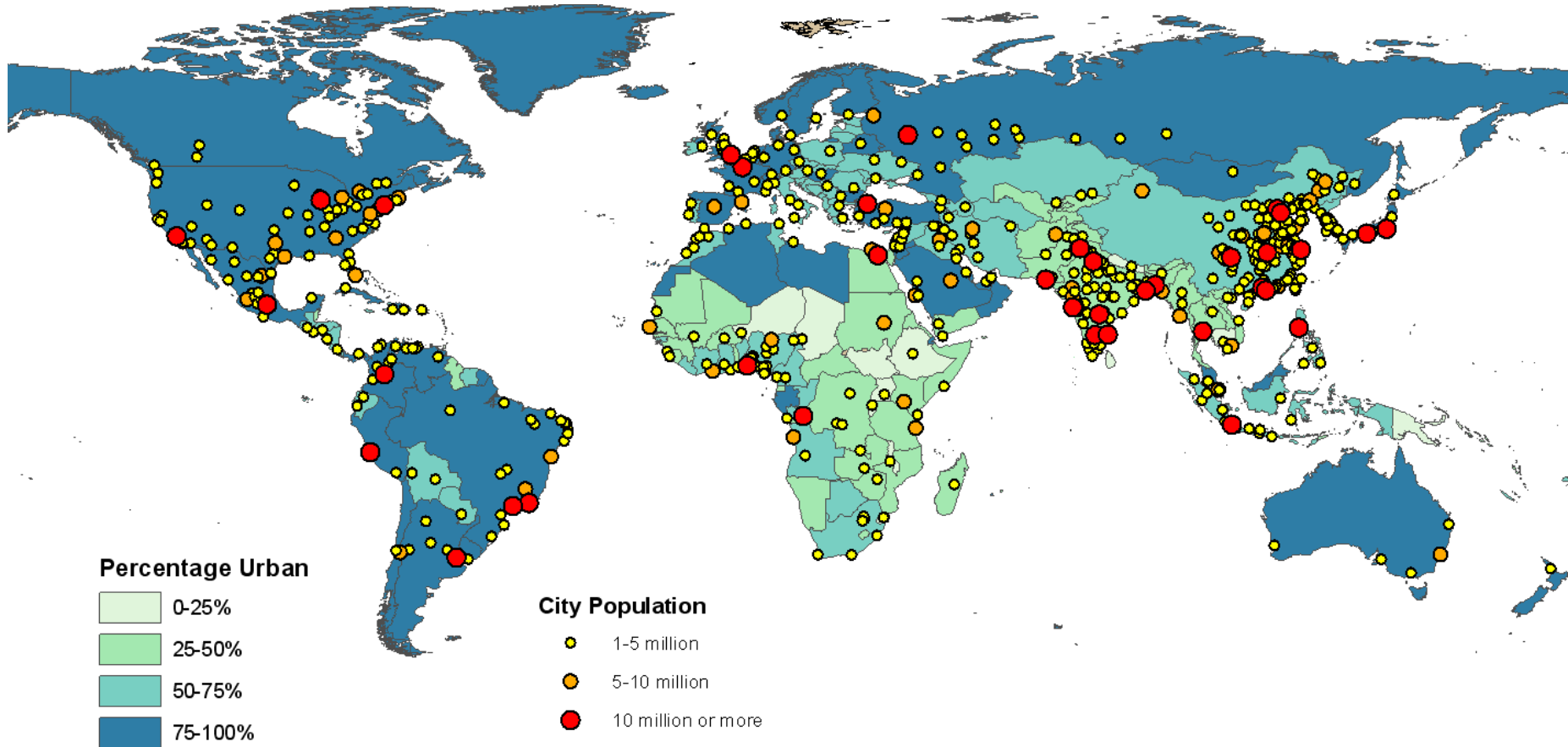


Global Urbanization in 2011



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.
[*World Urbanization Prospects, the 2011 Revision*](#). New York, 2012

Global Urbanization: 2025 Projection



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.
[*World Urbanization Prospects, the 2011 Revision*](#). New York, 2012

Two Persistent Perceptions of Cities



Chicago Loop, seen from "The Brownlands" (Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee)

City vs. Nature

Fosters the illusion of technology-mediated independence from the natural world as well as a profound yet often unfulfilled longing for contact with wildness within a polluted and biologically-impooverished cityscape.

City as Living Ecosystem

Recognizes that cities and suburbs comprise a complex urban ecosystem, a dynamic mosaic in which imperiled nature interacts with humans and their built environment, and where the idea of "natural" can be interrogated.

Urban Nature

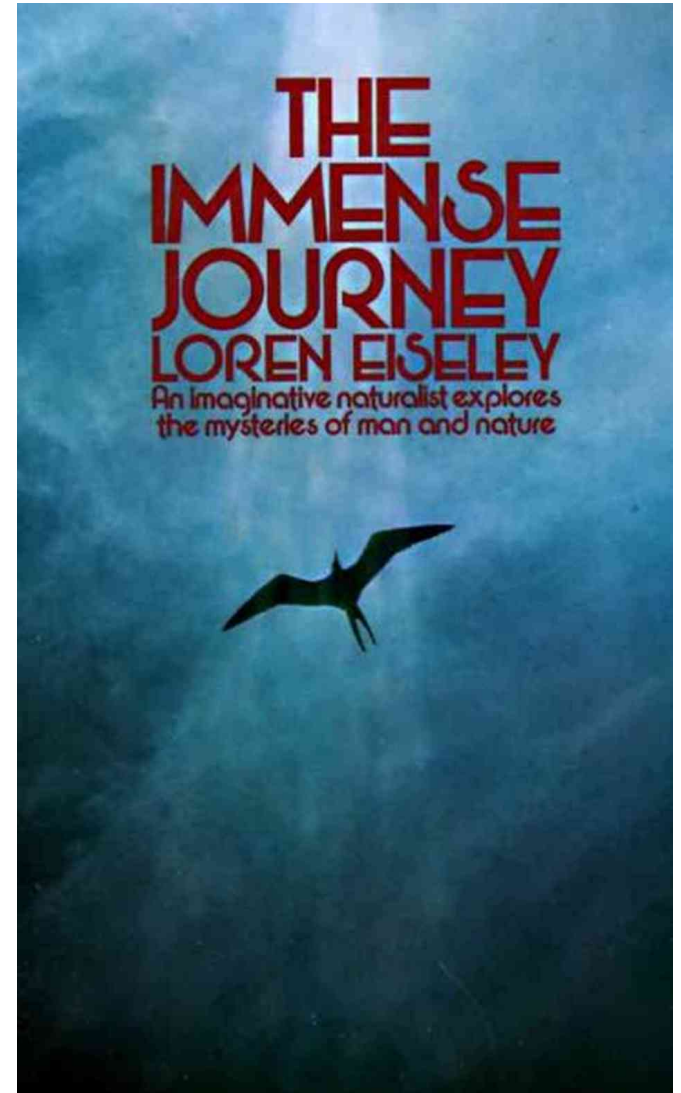


Central Park in New York

Loren Eiseley: Scientist & Nature Writer

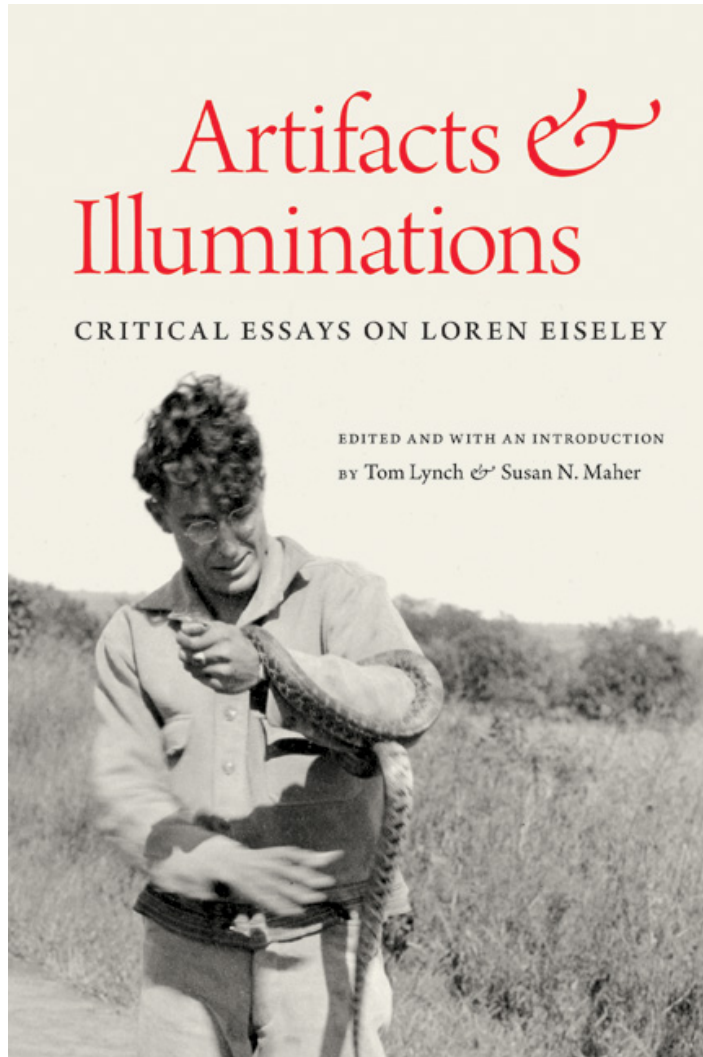


Loren Eiseley (1907-1977)



Unearthing Urban Nature

Loren Eiseley's Explorations of City and Suburb (2012)



Influenced by key places: Lincoln, NE; Philadelphia; New York City.

Characterized by recognition of urban and suburban biodiversity, observation of everyday nature, and critique of human environmental impacts.

Relevant as a harbinger of contemporary urban ecology and sustainability.

Validation of art and literature's relevance to the revitalization of cities and representation of urban nature.

Eiseley and the Urban Landscape



Bubbly Creek, South Side of Chicago, 2009 (M. Bryson)

What he saw (and still pertains):

- Impacts of sprawl & pollution
- Human alienation from nature
- Decay of urban infrastructure
- Biological paucity of manicured nature
- The city as ecosystem subject to evolutionary change
- Cities as sites of decay/illness

What's happened since:

- Sprawl and more sprawl
- Environmental regulations
- Re-imagination of wilderness in the city
- Biodiversity mapping & urban sustainability
- Ecological restoration (rivers, prairies, wetlands, woodlands)

Nature in Chicago



Suburban sprawl in the Chicago suburb of Shorewood, IL,
summer 2006 (M. Bryson)

Nature in Chicago



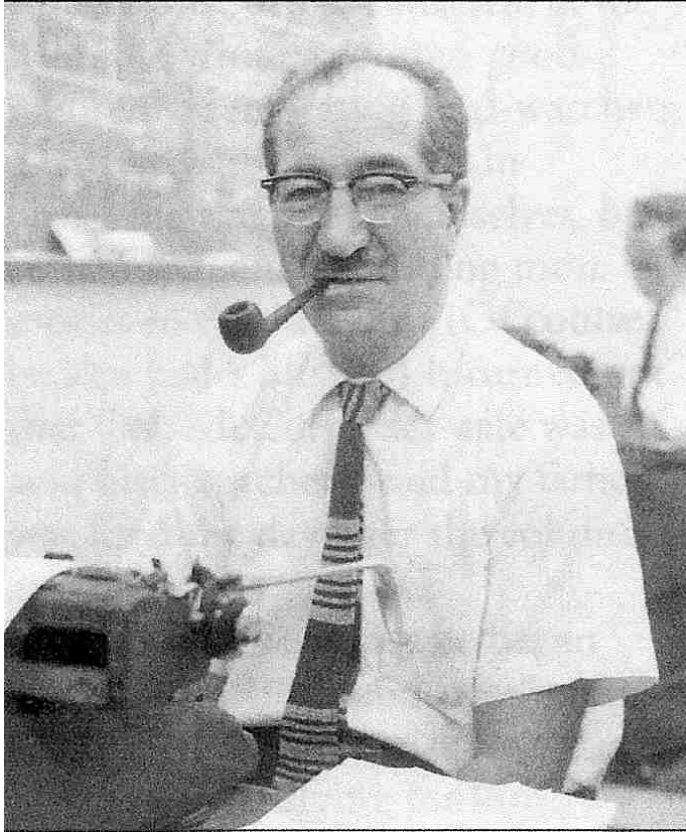
Life on the retaining wall – Bubbly Creek, South Side of Chicago (M. Bryson)

Nature in Chicago



Parkland design -- Stearns Quarry Park (est. 2009), South Side of Chicago (M. Bryson)

Leonard Dubkin: Chicago's Nature Writer



Leonard Dubkin (1905-1972)

The Murmur of Wings (1944)

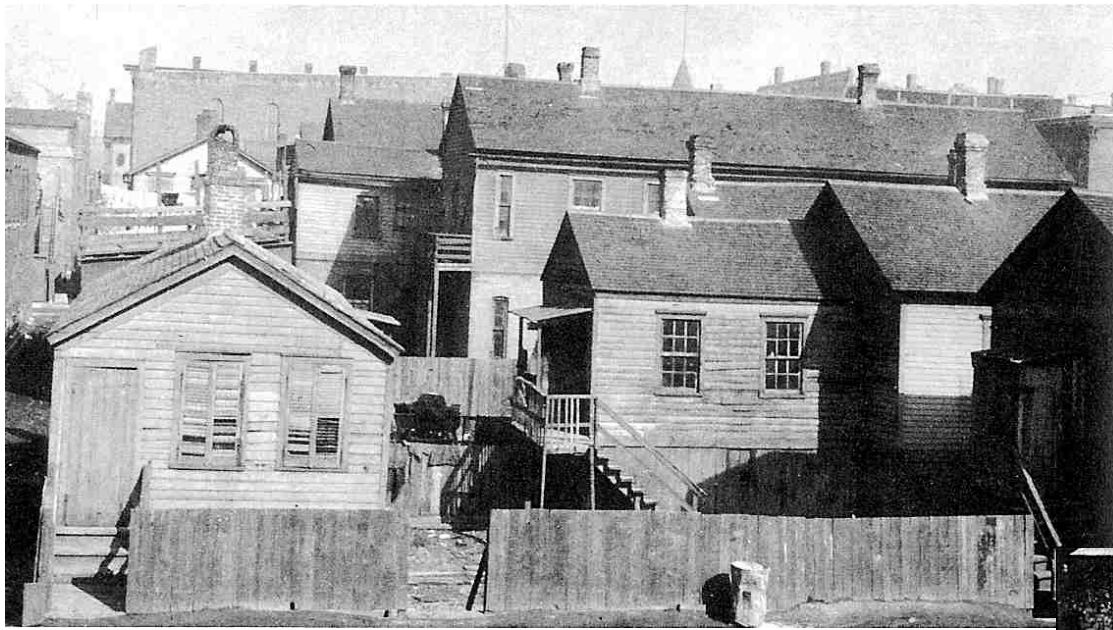
*Enchanted Streets: The Unlikely
Adventures of an Urban Nature
Lover* (1947)

The White Lady (1952)

Wolf Point: An Adventure in History
(1953)

The Natural History of a Yard (1955)

*My Secret Places: One Man's Love
Affair with Nature in the City* (1972)



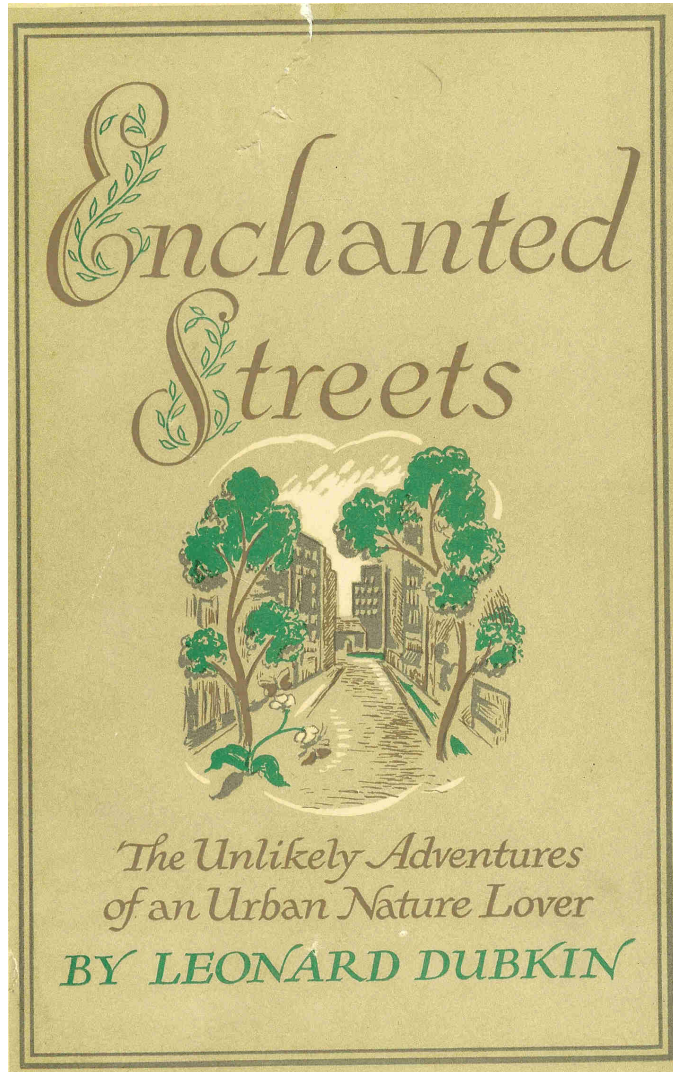
Chicago, early 20th century –
Jefferson St., c.1906 (left),
South Side alley (below left),
Slum-area back yard (below)

Source: Chicago Historical Society archives



Empty Lots and Secret Places

Leonard Dubkin's Explorations of Urban Nature in Chicago (2011)



Value of commonplace nature in cities, suburbs, and towns

Patient observation and direct experience

Connection of people with nature in urban environs

Challenge to symbolic constructions of “wilderness” and “city”

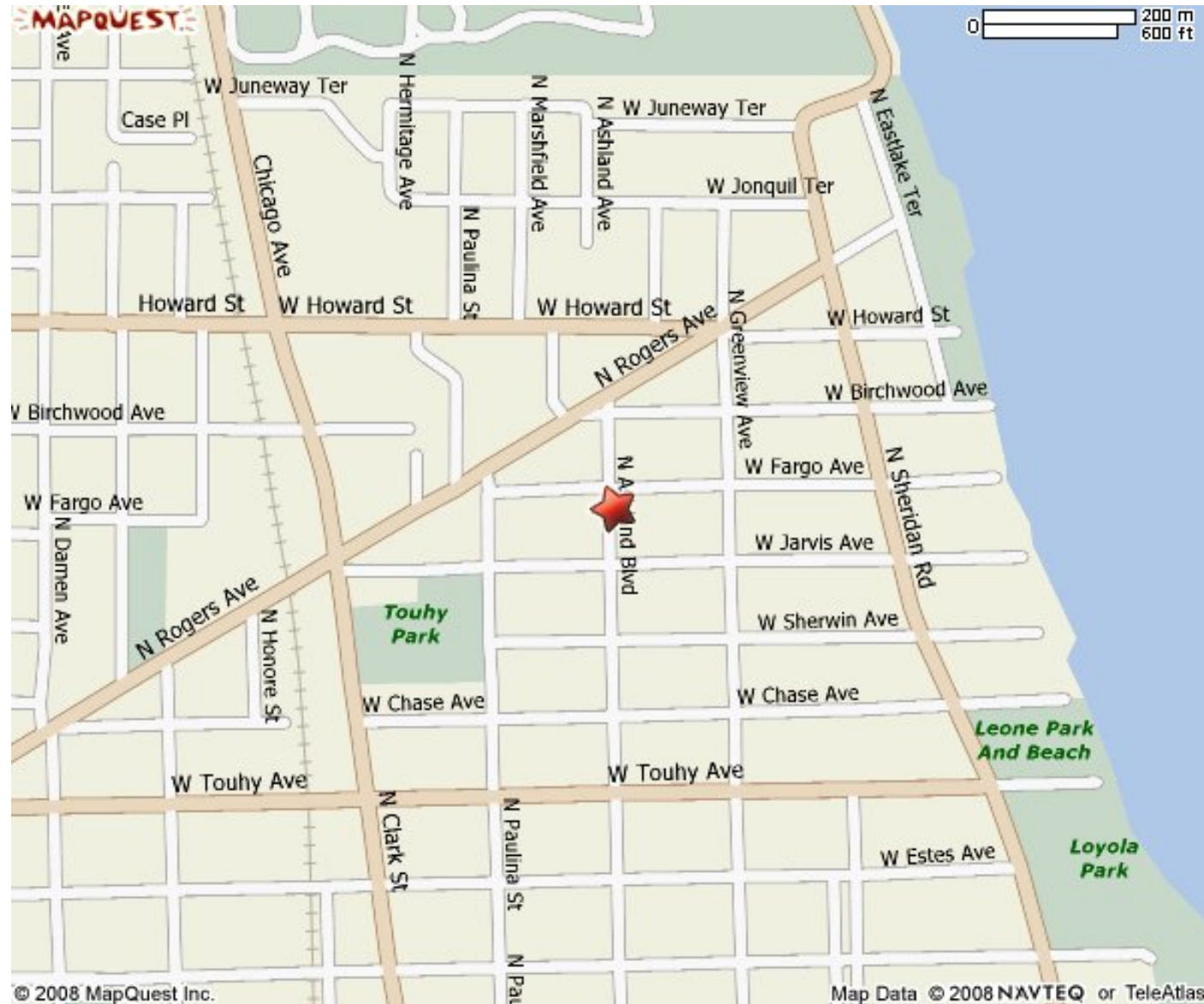
Harbinger of contemporary urban environmentalism and "Chicago Wilderness" movement

Nature in the Neighborhood



Dubkin Park, North Side of Chicago (M. Bryson)

Nature in the Neighborhood



Dubkin Park, North Side of Chicago (Mapquest, 2008)

Re-envisioning Dubkin Park

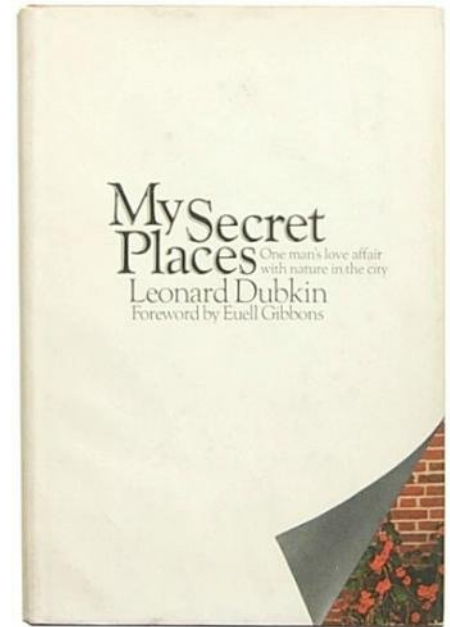


[Dubkin Park Community Garden](#), North Side of Chicago, ~2012

The Joys of Research

MY SECRET PLACES is a heart-catching book. Mr. Dubkin has no parallel as the naturalist of the city and its environs. An able and expert journalist, he has the heart and eye of a child. It is this which convinces those of us lost in adult affairs that there is still truly a hidden place between the last billboard and the viaduct, a place as worthy of preservation as a forest. In such spots a rare human gentleness can sometimes be nurtured. Leonard Dubkin is a graduate of that kind of innocent back lot school which Americans are close to losing forever. His work is not only readable, it is utterly sincere.

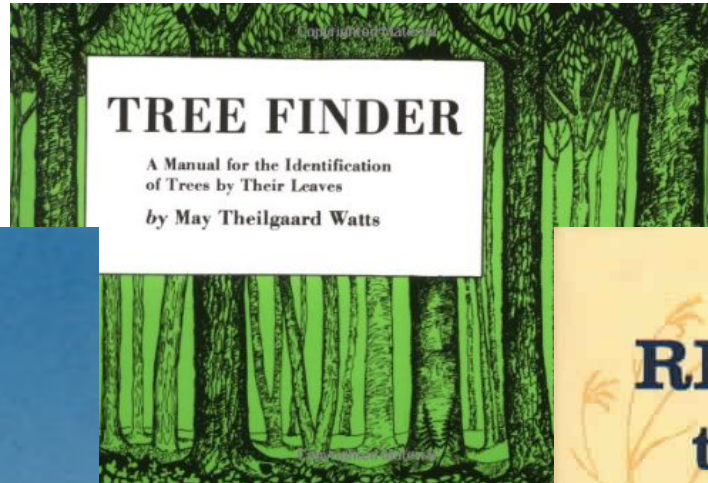
-- Loren Eiseley



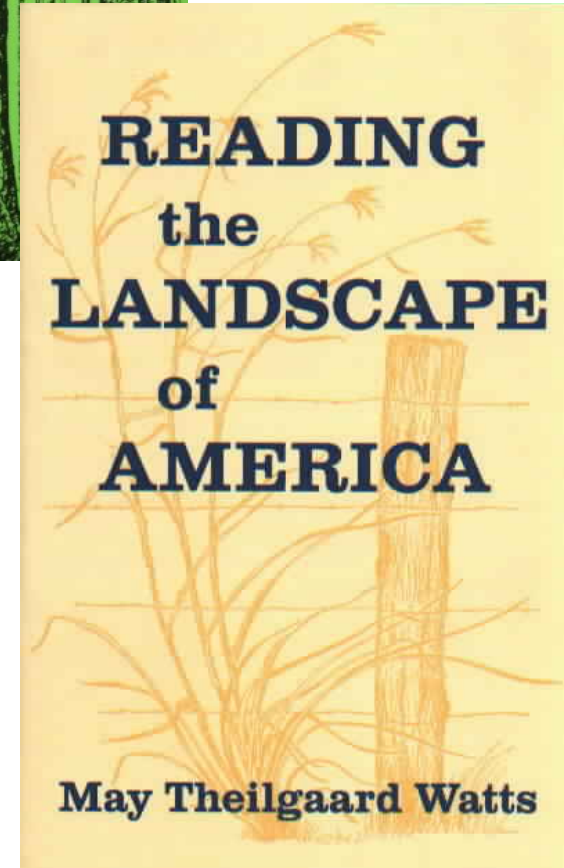
Carbon-copy of dust jacket blurb for Dubkin's last book, *My Secret Places* (1972) – contained in a 1972 letter from Eiseley to Dubkin

Reading the Book of Nature

May Watts and the Art of (Teaching) Ecology (2014, in progress)



May Watts (1893-1975)



The Morton Arboretum



Sterling Morton Library at the [Morton Arboretum](#) (above)



Spending time with a bur oak, Fall 2011 (right)

Ecology as the Study of Change

THE STORY OF A ROAD

From woodland path to city street, natives are gradually replaced by foreigners

First—a foot path

with sugar maple, lady ferns, trilliums, ovenbirds, foxes

Soon—a country lane

with hawthorn, wild plum, bracken fern, violets, brown thrasher, woodchuck

Presently—a country road

with apple trees, white pine, elderberry, rabbits, wild strawberry, meadow larks

Then—the edge of the country

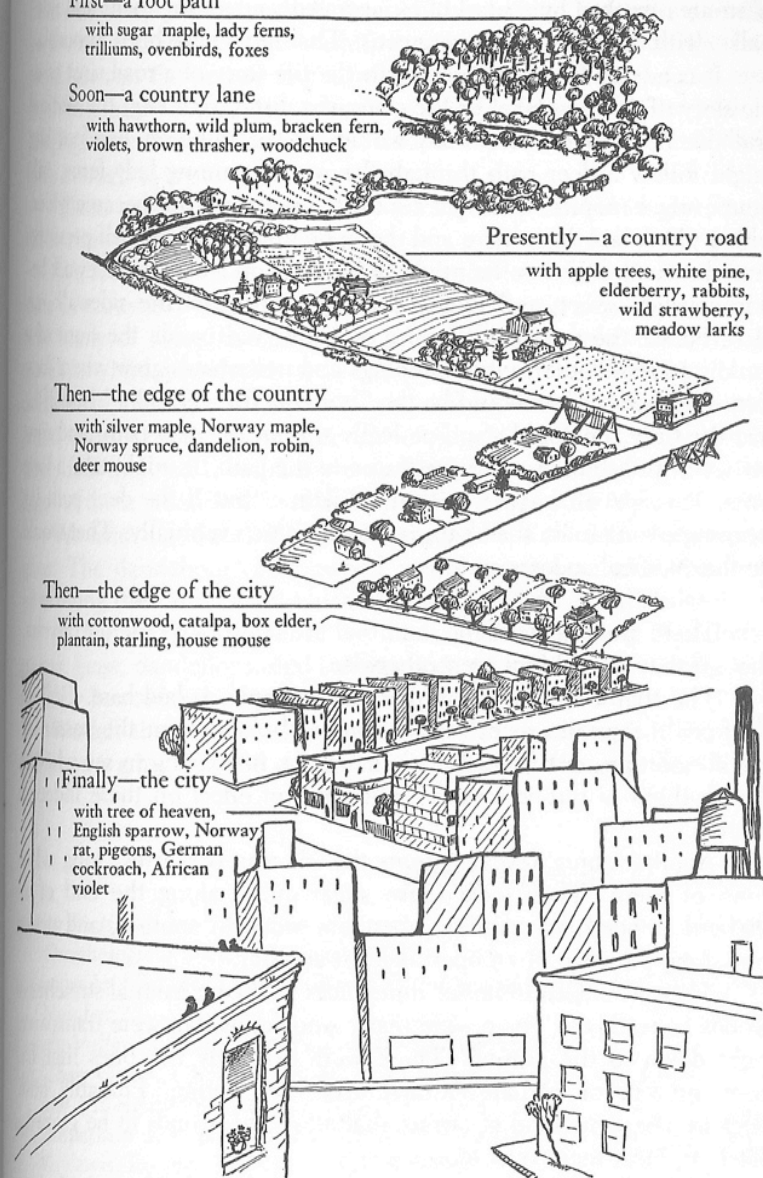
with silver maple, Norway maple, Norway spruce, dandelion, robin, deer mouse

Then—the edge of the city

with cottonwood, catalpa, box elder, plantain, starling, house mouse

Finally—the city

with tree of heaven, English sparrow, Norway rat, pigeons, German cockroach, African violet



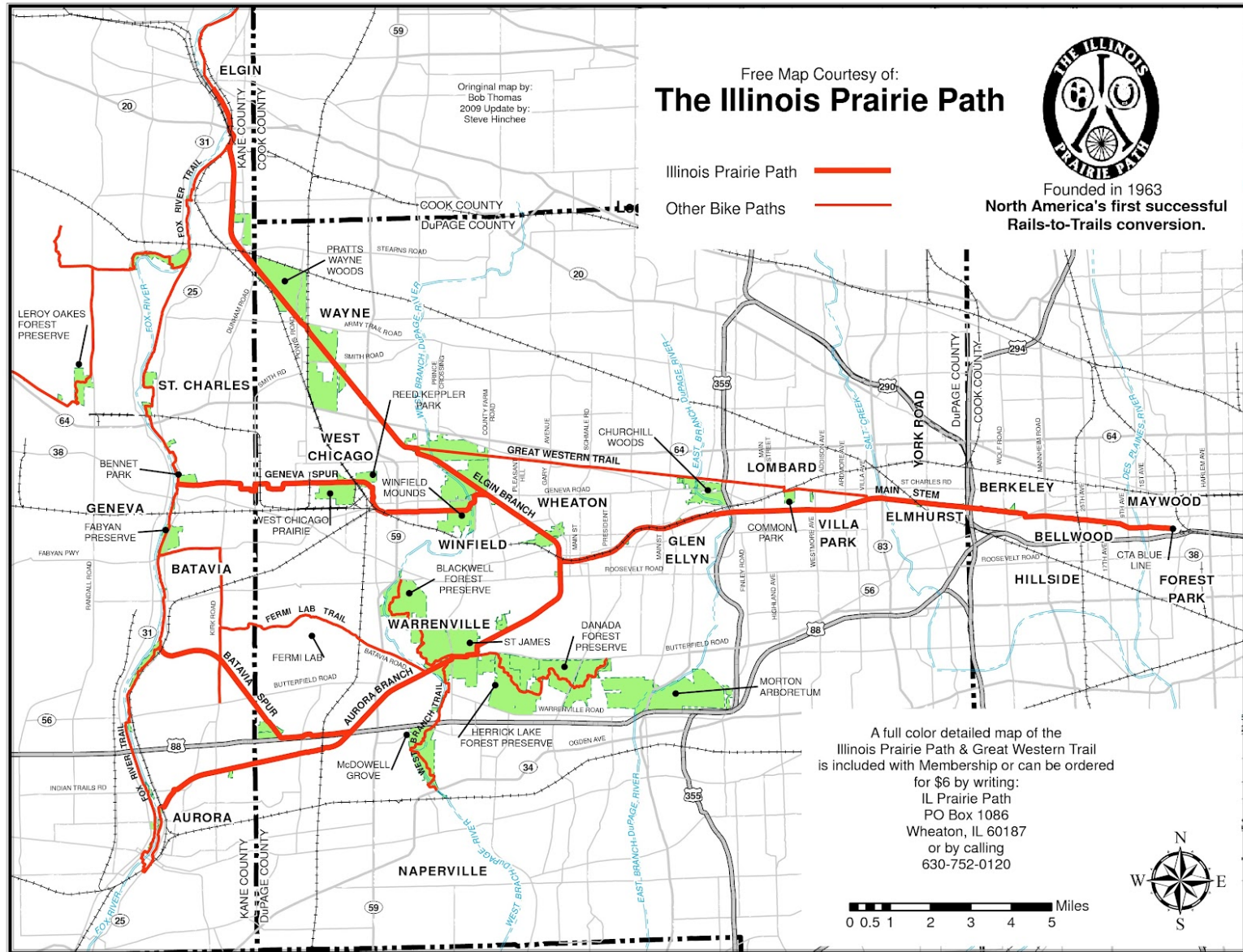
"There is good reading on the land, first-hand reading, involving no symbols.

"The records are written in forests, in fencerows, in bogs, in playgrounds, in pastures, in gardens, in canyons, in tree rings. . . .

"This ecology . . . Finds a story in a schoolyard, in the corner of an old cemetery, in a foundation planting, and even in a window box."

May Watts, *Reading the Landscape of America*, Preface to the 1st Ed.

Urban Conservation: Rails to Trails



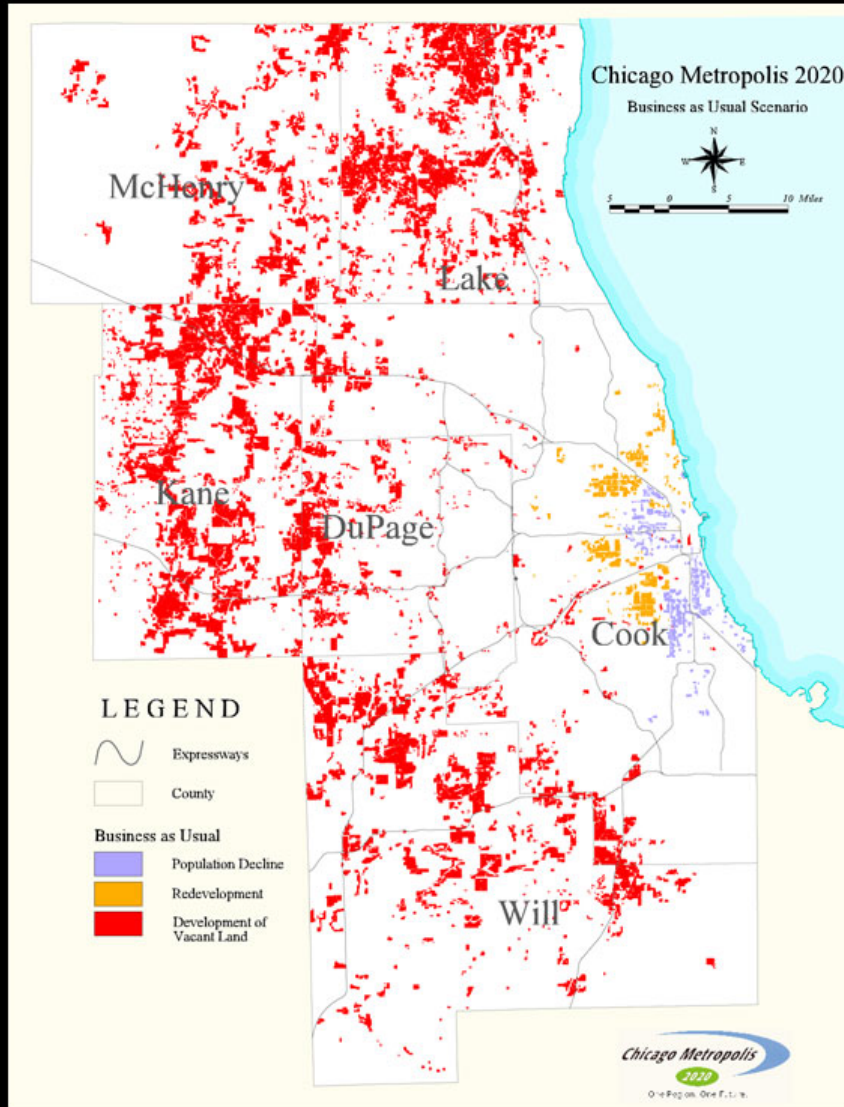
May Watts, founder of the [Illinois Prairie Path](#) (est. 1963)

Active Transportation in Small Cities



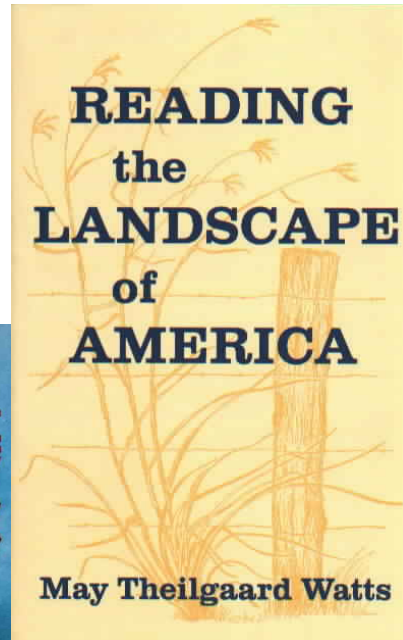
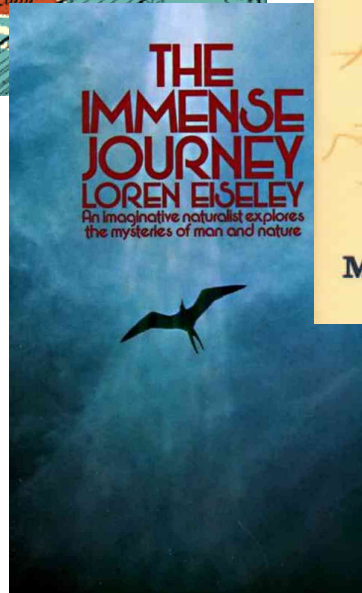
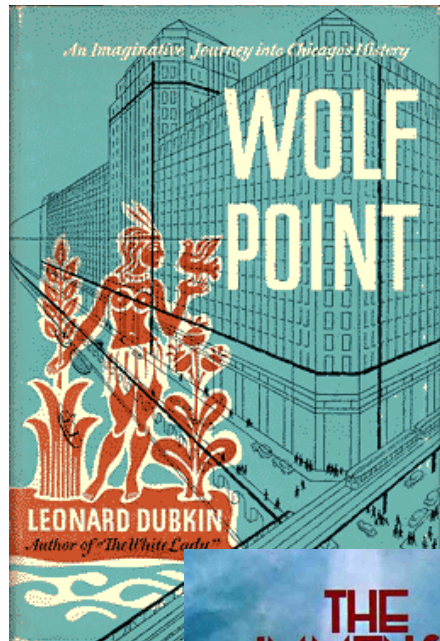
Bike to Metra (commuter train) Map – Joliet, IL (2010)

Land Use, Planning, Open Space Conservation



Chicago area business as usual growth trend vs. Metropolis Plan concept.
Image credit: Chicago Metropolis 2020

Urban Nature Writing and the Future of Cities



Contributes to the environmental history of our cities and suburbs

Challenges our assumptions about the urbanized landscape, the character of wilderness

Connects us to nature close at hand, underfoot

Exemplifies the engagement of the arts and humanities with ecological problems and environmental issues

Helps us envision what a sustainable city or suburb should be like

Current Research/Writing Projects

Creative Non-Fiction

"Canoeing through History: Wild Encounters on Bubbly Creek."

[City Creatures blog/book/art project](#) with Center for Humans and Nature (edited volume under review).

Urban Environmental History

"Infamous Past, Invisible Present: Searching for Bubbly Creek in the 21st Century." With Carl Zimring. Under consideration by *IA -- The Journal of Industrial Archeology* (scholarly article under review).

Ecocriticism / Urban Studies

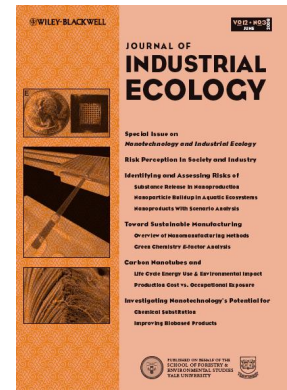
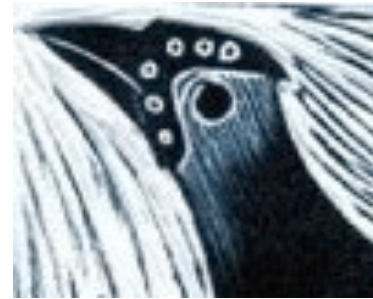
Mapping the Urban Wilderness: An Ecological and Literary Topography of Chicago (scholarly monograph, in progress).

Sustainability and Education

"[Schaumburg's Sustainable Future](#): Student Research, Social Media, and the 'Edge City' Suburb." *Journal of Environmental Studies and Science* (scholarly article, in progress).

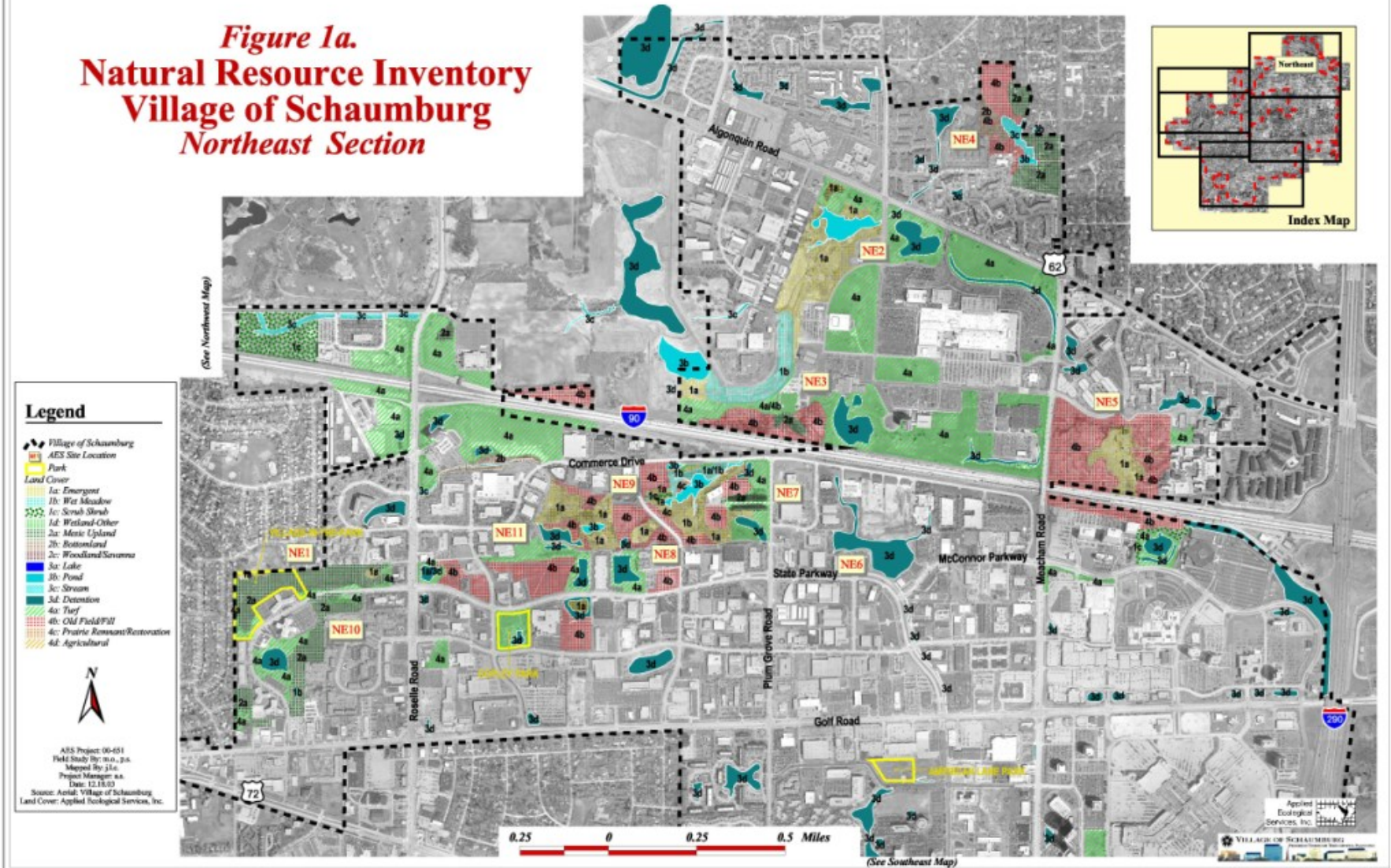
Journalism / New Media

Essayist for [City Creatures blog](#); editor of [SUST at RU](#) and [Schaumburg's Sustainable Future](#) blogs; op-ed columnist since 2006 for the Joliet [Herald-News](#)



Sustainability in the Suburbs

Figure 1a.
Natural Resource Inventory
Village of Schaumburg
Northeast Section



Mapping Schaumburg's Biodiversity (Schaumburg Biodiversity Plan, 2004)

Campus Redevelopment / Student Research

Greening RU's Schaumburg IL Campus



Sustainable landscape plan: native plants, prairie plots, walking paths, community garden

Water conservation strategies: bioswales, cisterns, rain gardens, pervious paving

Outdoor education / recreation: experimental wetland restoration, native plant gardens, RUrbanPioneers community garden, greenhouse, EcoSpace courtyard

Academics + Community Engagement:

Schaumburg's Sustainable Future
a student-authored [website and blog](#)

