



Charles Nilon (1956-Present)

Associate Professor of Urban Wildlife
Management

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Sciences, University of Missouri**

"You can apply your own personal interests, and find a job that fosters those interests in the environmental field." Charles Nilon, 2006.

Overview

Nilon's research considers the impact of urbanization on wildlife habitats, populations and communities. Since 1997, Nilon has been a co-principal investigator on the Baltimore Ecosystem Study (BES), one of two urban ecosystems included in the National Science Foundation's Long-Term Ecological Research program. His work with the BES focuses on understanding how ecological and socioeconomic factors influence bird species composition and abundance. Because urban areas are homes for people as well as wildlife, Nilon's research also considers the role of nature as part of an individual's day-to-day environment, and environmental justice issues associated with access to nature.

Nilon and his students have worked on projects in Kansas City and St. Louis that seek to understand how people perceive open spaces in their neighborhood. Recently he has collaborated with colleagues from the MU School of Medicine on a project studying the kinds of open spaces where children are active. Since 2010 Nilon has been a principal investigator on three different synthesis projects that are compiling data from more than 150 of the world's cities. The projects seek to understand global patterns of biodiversity in cities, the filters that shape species composition in cities, and the social and ecological factors that shape patterns of abundance in cities, and apply that information to management, conservation and planning programs. Some of his selected publications include:

- Aronson, M.F.J, F.A. La Sorte, C.H. Nilon, M.Katti, M.A. Goddard, C.A. Lepczyk, P.S. Warren, N.S.G. Williams, S. Cilliers, B. Clarkson, C. Dobbs, R. Dolan, M. Hedblom, S. Klotz, J. Louwe Kooijmans, I. Kuhn, I. MacGregor-Fors, M. McDonnell, U. Mortberg, P. Pysek, S. Siebert, J. Sushinsky, P. Werner, and M. Winter. 2014.
A global analysis of the impacts of urbanization on bird and plant diversity reveals key anthropogenic drivers. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*. DOI 10.1098/rspb.2013.3330

- Parker, T.S., S.K. Gonzales, and C.H. Nilon. 2014. Seasonal comparisons of daily activity budgets of gray squirrels (*Sciurus carolinensis*) in urban areas. *Urban Ecosystems* DOI 10.1007/s11252-014-371-2
- Müller, N., M. Iganatieva, C.H. Nilon, P. Werner, and W.C. Zipperer. 2013. Patterns and trends in urban biodiversity and landscape design. Pages 123-174 in, T. Elmqvist et al., eds. *Urbanization, Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services: Challenges and Opportunities*. Springer Netherlands, Amsterdam. http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-007-7088-1_10
- Pickett, S.T.A., G.S. Brush, A.J. Felson, B.P. McGrath, J.M. Grove, C.H. Nilon, K. Szlavecz, C. Swan, P.S. Warren. 2012. *The Baltimore Ecosystem Study: Understanding and working with urban biodiversity*. CityGreen 4. <http://www.cuge.com.sg/research/CITYGREEN-Issue-4>

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Education

“I’ve always enjoyed the outdoors,” Charles Nilon says. He describes his childhood in Boulder, Colorado as a mix of the urban and the natural: while he enjoyed the city and urban life, he also spent a lot of time outdoors in the Rocky Mountains on Boy Scout and church camping trips. Nilon found a way to combine the two in his career as an academic, through which he researches the impact of urbanization on wildlife habitats, populations, and communities.

Nilon majored in biology as an undergraduate at Morehouse College in Atlanta. The summer after his sophomore year, he volunteered for a research project at the University of Colorado, where he met a graduate with a degree in wildlife management and decided that he, too, was interested in that subject. The following summer he did a research internship with Argonne National Lab in Chicago, which gave him the opportunity to work both in the lab and outdoors. After graduating from Morehouse, Nilon did a master’s degree in forestry and environmental studies at Yale, then took a job as a wildlife biologist in Missouri.

After two years of working as a wildlife biologist, Nilon decided that he wanted to get his doctorate. After earning his doctorate in 1986, Nilon worked for a year as a general biology professor at his alma mater (Morehouse), spent two years as the urban wildlife program coordinator for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, and was then hired on as a faculty member at the University of Missouri, where he has remained ever since.

Mentoring Others

When asked if he now mentors young minorities in the environmental field, Nilon’s answer is an emphatic “Yes!” Though the University of Missouri does not have a very diverse student body, Nilon believes that this makes mentorship all the more crucial for the minorities that are there. As advisor for Missouri’s

chapter of Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS), Nilon mentors a number of undergraduate students as well as several others who do research in his lab. Additionally, Nilon has worked in the past and continues to work with minority graduate students; he currently has three who are working under his direction. Nilon also serves as an advisor to the Ecological Society of America's SEEDS program, which focuses on increasing recruitment of black college students to the environmental field.

Nilon considers diversity work a very important component of his career. In addition to his work mentoring minority students, he is currently a member of the Affirmative Action Committee at Missouri's College of Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources and served for two years as President of the University of Missouri Black Staff and Faculty Association. While Nilon remains committed to increasing opportunities for minorities, especially African Americans, in the environmental field, he also expresses frustration as what he sees as a lack of progress over time. "As an African American faculty member, it bothers me to see people in the same struggle I had when I was in school," Nilon explains. "Progress is not as evident as I'd like it to be. Things don't seem to change much in terms of what happens to underrepresented students and faculty."

Despite such concerns, Nilon is content with what his career has allowed him to do and become. He relishes his ability to interact with the different kinds of people involved in the field, from students and other academics to people in the communities he researches. Because of his work in international urban ecology issues, he has had the ability to travel internationally to Africa and Australia, something he greatly enjoyed. Nilon is most proud of "being known and recognized as a leader, as someone who has built up a good national and international reputation in urban wildlife conservation."

Importance of Mentoring to Career

In his long and diverse career, both inside and outside of academia, Nilon has had a host of mentors who have influenced his personal and professional development, beginning with his parents. His father, the late Charles Nilon Sr., and his mother, Mildred, both worked in academic settings, Charles as an English professor and Mildred as a librarian. "They both gave me advice about working in an academic setting, and about the challenges I would face as an African American student and professor," Nilon says.

James Curry, a math professor at the University of Colorado, was also an important resource for Nilon in terms of dealing with the unique situations he would face as an African American academic. In a broad sense, Drs. Judy Bender, Tom Norris, and Fredrick Mapp at Morehouse supported and encouraged Nilon's interest and development in the environment; at Yale, the late Rick Miller, Nilon's master's advisor, Steven Keller and Stephen Berwick supported his interest in wildlife and were heavily involved in his master's project; and at SUNY, Nilon's advisor Larry VanDruff helped him shape his ideas and self-image as a scientist, and the two built a genuine friendship that they maintain to this day. In addition to academic mentors, Rowan Rowntree of the Forest Service was very encouraging and helped Nilon focus his research interests.

Advice to Young Professionals

“It’s a great field!” Nilon says enthusiastically about environmental work. Noting that the field spans many disciplines and topics, he advises minorities interested in environmental careers to consider their interests and create a niche that works for them: “You can apply your own personal interests, and find a job that fosters those interests in the environmental field.”