

The Role of Urban Green Spaces in Mitigating Climate Change: An Integrative Review of Ecological, Social, and Health Benefits

Varun Athokpam¹, Themmeichon Chamroy¹ and Haripriya Ngairangbam²

¹Department of Horticulture, School of Agriculture, Lovely Professional University, India

²Department of Agronomy, School of Agriculture, Lovely Professional University, India

Citation: Varun Athokpam, Themmeichon Chamroy and Haripriya Ngairangbam (2024). The Role of Urban Green Spaces in Mitigating Climate Change: An Integrative Review of Ecological, Social, and Health Benefits. *Environmental Reports*.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51470/ER.2024.6.1.10>

Corresponding Author: **Varun Athokpam** | E-Mail: (varun15athokpam@gmail.com)

Received 14 January 2024 | Revised 19 February 2024 | Accepted 24 March 2024 | Available Online April 30 2024

ABSTRACT

Urban green spaces (UGS) are increasingly recognized as essential components of cities for mitigating climate change and enhancing environmental, social, and public health outcomes. This integrative review explores the multifaceted benefits of UGS, focusing on their ecological contributions such as carbon sequestration, biodiversity support, and air quality improvement. It also highlights the social and economic benefits of green spaces, including community cohesion, enhanced property values, and opportunities for environmental stewardship. Furthermore, the review examines the positive impacts of UGS on physical and mental health, particularly in mitigating the adverse health effects of urban heat islands and climate-induced stress. The findings emphasize the critical role of UGS in creating resilient, sustainable, and livable cities. Finally, the review discusses the challenges of equitable access, land use, and maintenance while offering policy recommendations for integrating green infrastructure into urban planning.

Keywords: Urban Green Spaces, Climate Change, Ecological Benefits, Social Well-being, Public Health, Green Infrastructure

Introduction

As the global population continues to urbanize at an unprecedented rate, cities face escalating environmental challenges, particularly those associated with climate change. Urban areas, which are responsible for a significant portion of global greenhouse gas emissions, are increasingly vulnerable to climate-related impacts, such as rising temperatures, flooding, and air pollution. In this context, urban green spaces (UGS)—including parks, gardens, green roofs, wetlands, and street trees—have emerged as a critical element in urban planning and sustainability efforts [1]. These spaces offer a wide range of ecological, social, and health benefits that can help mitigate the effects of climate change while enhancing the quality of life for urban residents. The multifunctional role of urban green spaces has garnered significant attention from researchers, urban planners, and policymakers. As natural elements integrated into urban landscapes, green spaces contribute to environmental sustainability by improving air quality, sequestering carbon, mitigating urban heat islands, and promoting biodiversity. Beyond their ecological functions, UGS also play a crucial social role by fostering community engagement, promoting mental and physical well-being, and enhancing social cohesion [2-3]. Additionally, they contribute to economic vitality by increasing property values and supporting local economies through tourism and recreational opportunities.

The importance of urban green spaces in climate change adaptation and mitigation cannot be overstated. As cities grow and face mounting environmental pressures, the need for resilient, sustainable, and livable urban environments becomes more urgent. Integrating green spaces into urban infrastructure not only addresses immediate environmental challenges but also creates healthier, more equitable communities [4-5]. This paper aims to provide an integrative review of the role of urban

green spaces in mitigating climate change, focusing on their ecological, social, and health benefits. By examining the various pathways through which green spaces contribute to urban resilience, this review highlights the potential of UGS to serve as a vital tool in climate adaptation strategies. Furthermore, the paper will explore the challenges associated with the development and maintenance of green spaces and propose policy recommendations to optimize their impact in urban settings.

2. Ecological Benefits of Urban Green Spaces

Urban green spaces play a pivotal role in enhancing ecological sustainability by addressing several environmental challenges linked to climate change. Their ability to regulate temperature, sequester carbon, and improve air quality contributes significantly to urban climate resilience [6].

2.1. Carbon Sequestration and Air Quality Improvement

One of the most recognized ecological benefits of urban green spaces is their capacity to sequester carbon dioxide (CO₂). Trees, shrubs, and other vegetation absorb CO₂ from the atmosphere during photosynthesis, storing carbon in their biomass and soil. Urban forests and large parks, in particular, serve as significant carbon sinks, offsetting emissions generated from urban activities such as transportation and industry. The ability of green spaces to sequester carbon is crucial in mitigating the greenhouse gas effect, which is the primary driver of climate change [7]. According to research, urban green spaces in cities can capture an estimated 1.2 to 1.6 tons of carbon per hectare annually, depending on vegetation type and management practices. In addition to carbon sequestration, UGS improve urban air quality by filtering pollutants such as particulate matter (PM), sulfur dioxide (SO₂), and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) [8]. Plants capture these harmful pollutants on their leaves and surfaces, reducing their concentrations in the atmosphere.

This, in turn, reduces the incidence of respiratory diseases, especially in high-density urban areas where air pollution is a persistent health concern. Studies have demonstrated that urban parks with dense tree cover can lower local levels of airborne pollutants by as much as 30%, thus contributing to improved public health.

2.2. Urban Heat Island Mitigation

Another crucial ecological function of urban green spaces is their ability to mitigate the urban heat island (UHI) effect. UHIs occur when cities experience significantly higher temperatures than surrounding rural areas due to the extensive use of heat-absorbing materials like concrete and asphalt. These materials trap heat, leading to elevated temperatures, especially during the night. Urban green spaces, through shade provision and evapotranspiration (the process by which plants release water vapor into the atmosphere), help cool urban areas and reduce the UHI effect [9]. Research has shown that temperatures in areas with ample green cover can be 2 to 4 degrees Celsius lower than in nearby built-up areas, providing much-needed cooling during heatwaves.

2.3. Biodiversity Enhancement

Urban green spaces also play a vital role in enhancing biodiversity. These spaces serve as habitats for a wide variety of species, from birds and insects to small mammals, contributing to urban biodiversity [10]. By offering a refuge for flora and fauna, urban green spaces support ecosystem services such as pollination, water purification, and soil stabilization. Additionally, they provide important corridors that allow wildlife to move between different parts of the city, thus maintaining ecological balance.

Benefit Category	Specific Benefits	Details
Ecological Benefits	Carbon Sequestration	Urban green spaces act as carbon sinks, absorbing CO2 from the atmosphere, which helps mitigate climate change.
	Biodiversity Support	Green spaces provide habitats for various species, promoting biodiversity and enhancing ecosystem resilience.
	Urban Heat Island Mitigation	Vegetation helps cool urban areas through shade and evapotranspiration, reducing the urban heat island effect and lowering energy consumption for cooling.
Social Benefits	Community Cohesion	Green spaces serve as gathering spots for social interactions, fostering community ties and reducing isolation.
	Economic Revitalization	Proximity to green spaces increases property values and can attract businesses and tourism, contributing to local economic growth.
	Opportunities for Recreation and Leisure	Parks and green areas provide space for recreational activities, enhancing the quality of life for residents.
Health Benefits	Physical Health Improvement	Access to green spaces encourages physical activity, reducing the risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular issues.
	Mental Health Enhancement	Exposure to nature reduces stress, anxiety, and depression, improving overall mental well-being.
	Air Quality Improvement	Vegetation helps filter pollutants from the air, improving overall air quality and reducing respiratory diseases.

3. Social Benefits of Urban Green Spaces

Urban green spaces not only provide ecological advantages but also offer a range of social benefits that contribute to the well-being of urban populations. These spaces foster social interaction, community engagement, and promote healthier lifestyles, which are essential for creating resilient and sustainable urban environments [11]. As cities become increasingly crowded and fast-paced, the role of green spaces as areas of social cohesion, recreation, and mental respite is more important than ever.

3.1. Social Cohesion and Community Engagement

Urban green spaces act as hubs for social interaction, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and age groups. Parks, gardens, and public plazas are often places where individuals can engage in recreational activities, participate in community events, or simply relax. These interactions help foster a sense of community, promote social cohesion, and build relationships among residents. In areas with limited access to such spaces, feelings of isolation and detachment from the community can increase, particularly in densely populated urban environments [12]. Green spaces also offer opportunities for community participation in environmental stewardship. Many cities encourage residents to engage in activities such as tree planting, community gardening, and park clean-ups. These activities not only enhance the urban environment but also create a sense of shared responsibility for the sustainability of

urban spaces [13]. Studies have shown that when individuals are involved in the care and maintenance of green spaces, they develop a greater sense of attachment to their communities, which can lead to more active civic participation.

3.2. Economic Benefits

Urban green spaces provide direct and indirect economic benefits. One of the most apparent economic contributions is the increase in property values for homes and businesses located near well-maintained parks and gardens. Studies indicate that properties near green spaces can see a significant increase in value due to the aesthetic appeal and recreational opportunities they provide. This, in turn, can lead to a positive economic impact on neighborhoods, attracting investment and enhancing the overall quality of life. Additionally, green spaces support local economies through tourism and recreational activities. Well-known urban parks, such as Central Park in New York or Hyde Park in London, attract millions of visitors annually, boosting the local economy by supporting nearby businesses, restaurants, and hotels [14]. Smaller urban parks and community green spaces, though less famous, also contribute to economic vitality by providing spaces for events, markets, and recreational sports, all of which generate revenue for local economies.

3.3. Mental and Emotional Well-being

The mental health benefits of urban green spaces are well-documented.

Access to nature and green environments is linked to reduced stress, anxiety, and depression. Natural settings provide a respite from the noise, crowds, and fast pace of urban life, offering individuals a place to relax, reflect, and restore their mental energy. Research has shown that spending time in green spaces can lower cortisol levels, reduce the risk of mental health disorders, and improve overall psychological well-being [15]. Green spaces also offer children and the elderly a vital environment for play, physical activity, and social interaction, contributing to their mental and emotional development. Studies have found that children who have regular access to nature exhibit better cognitive function, emotional regulation, and creativity, while the elderly benefit from improved mental acuity and reduced feelings of loneliness when they engage with green environments.

4. Health Benefits of Urban Green Spaces

Urban green spaces (UGS) provide substantial health benefits that contribute to the overall well-being of urban populations. With increasing urbanization, sedentary lifestyles, and rising pollution levels, the need for accessible, natural environments within cities has become critical. Green spaces offer opportunities for physical activity, mental relaxation, and improved air quality, all of which contribute to better physical and mental health outcomes. In this section, we explore how UGS promote health by facilitating physical exercise, reducing stress, and mitigating the health impacts of air pollution and heat [16].

4.1. Promotion of Physical Activity

Urban green spaces encourage physical activity by providing areas for walking, jogging, cycling, and other forms of exercise. Unlike gym environments or indoor fitness facilities, green spaces offer a natural setting that can make physical activity more enjoyable and accessible to a broader demographic. Studies have shown that individuals who live near parks or have easy access to green spaces are more likely to engage in regular physical exercise, which is associated with reduced risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes [17]. Children, in particular, benefit from access to urban green spaces, as they are more likely to engage in outdoor play, which is crucial for their physical development. Playgrounds, open fields, and sports facilities in urban parks provide safe spaces for children to explore and engage in active play, which can help combat rising rates of childhood obesity and related health conditions. For the elderly and individuals with limited mobility, green spaces offer gentle physical activity options like walking or gardening, which help improve cardiovascular health, muscle strength, and balance. These low-impact activities can significantly improve the quality of life for older adults by reducing the risk of falls, enhancing mobility, and promoting social interaction with others in the community.

4.2. Mental Health and Stress Reduction

The mental health benefits of urban green spaces are profound. Studies have consistently shown that spending time in natural environments, even for short periods, can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Green spaces provide a calming, restorative atmosphere that helps individuals recover from the mental fatigue often associated with urban living. This phenomenon, known as "restorative environment theory," suggests that exposure to nature helps individuals regain focus, reduce stress, and improve overall cognitive functioning [18]. In densely populated cities, where noise pollution, crowded living

conditions, and hectic lifestyles are prevalent, green spaces serve as vital areas for relaxation and mental rejuvenation. Simply being in a park, surrounded by greenery, can trigger physiological responses that lower cortisol levels and blood pressure, both of which are indicators of stress. Moreover, the opportunity to connect with nature through activities like walking in a park, meditating, or observing wildlife can enhance mood and reduce symptoms of mental health disorders.

4.3. Mitigation of Air Pollution and Heat Stress

Urban green spaces also help mitigate some of the adverse health effects caused by air pollution and excessive heat, both of which are exacerbated by urbanization and climate change. Trees and vegetation in green spaces act as natural air filters by absorbing pollutants such as particulate matter (PM), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), and ozone (O₃). Improved air quality can lead to a reduction in respiratory diseases, asthma, and other pollution-related health issues, especially in children and the elderly, who are more vulnerable to poor air quality [19]. Furthermore, UGS help reduce the urban heat island (UHI) effect, which occurs when urban areas experience higher temperatures than their rural counterparts due to the concentration of heat-absorbing materials like concrete and asphalt. Prolonged exposure to extreme heat can lead to heat stress, heatstroke, and cardiovascular complications, particularly in vulnerable populations such as the elderly and people with pre-existing health conditions. By providing shade and promoting evapotranspiration (the release of water vapor from plants), green spaces cool the surrounding environment, helping to reduce heat-related illnesses and lower the overall risk of heat-induced mortality.

5. Challenges and Limitations

Despite the clear benefits of urban green spaces (UGS), their effective implementation faces several significant challenges that can hinder their role in climate change mitigation. One of the primary obstacles is the limited space available in urban areas, where competing land uses often take precedence over green infrastructure. As cities continue to grow, the demand for housing, commercial development, and transportation infrastructure can overshadow the need for parks and green areas. This competition for land can lead to the prioritization of built environments over natural spaces, limiting the opportunities for creating new green spaces [20]. Maintenance costs present another challenge for urban green spaces. While the initial investment in establishing these areas may be supported, the ongoing costs associated with landscaping, irrigation, and general upkeep can strain municipal budgets. Many cities face budget constraints that may limit their ability to adequately maintain existing green spaces, leading to degradation and underutilization. Poorly maintained parks can deter residents from using them, reducing the anticipated health and social benefits [21-22]. Equitable access to urban green spaces is also a critical issue. Access is often unevenly distributed, with marginalized and low-income communities frequently facing barriers to enjoying these vital resources. This inequity can exacerbate existing social inequalities, as those in underserved neighborhoods may have limited access to the health benefits provided by green spaces. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that all urban residents can experience the full range of benefits that UGS offer, thus maximizing their potential impact on climate change mitigation and public health.

6. Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

To maximize the benefits of urban green spaces (UGS) in mitigating climate change, urban planners and policymakers must prioritize several key strategies that can enhance the effectiveness of green infrastructure. One of the most critical recommendations is to incorporate green spaces into urban design. This involves integrating green infrastructure into new developments and urban renewal projects to create sustainable and resilient urban environments. Policies should mandate a minimum percentage of green coverage in both public and private developments, ensuring that cities not only maintain but also expand their green assets. This integration can take various forms, including green roofs, vertical gardens, and community parks, which can be seamlessly blended into the urban fabric. Another essential strategy is investing in green space maintenance. Cities must allocate sufficient funding for the upkeep and enhancement of green spaces to ensure their longevity and effectiveness in providing ecological, social, and health benefits. Regular maintenance, including landscaping, irrigation, and waste management, is crucial for keeping these spaces safe, attractive, and usable. Additionally, cities can explore public-private partnerships to secure funding and resources for the maintenance of green spaces, thereby fostering community involvement and investment. Lastly, it is imperative to promote green space equity in urban planning efforts. Ensuring that green spaces are equitably distributed across neighborhoods, particularly in underserved communities that have historically lacked access to parks and recreational areas, is crucial. Policymakers should conduct assessments to identify areas with limited green space access and prioritize investments in these neighborhoods [22-24]. Community engagement in the planning process can help ensure that the needs and preferences of local residents are considered, ultimately leading to more inclusive and beneficial green spaces.

7. Conclusion

Urban green spaces play a vital role in mitigating the environmental, social, and health challenges associated with climate change. These areas serve as carbon sinks, help regulate urban temperatures, and enhance biodiversity, thereby contributing to climate resilience and sustainability. Beyond their ecological benefits, green spaces foster social cohesion, encourage physical activity, and improve mental well-being, significantly enhancing the quality of life for urban residents. As cities continue to grow, the intentional integration of green spaces into urban planning and policy will be crucial for building resilient and sustainable environments. Prioritizing these spaces can help cities effectively address the impacts of climate change while promoting public health and social equity, ensuring that all residents have access to the benefits that green spaces provide.

References

- Demuzere, M., Orru, K., Heidrich, O., Olazabal, E., Geneletti, D., Orru, H., ... & Faehnle, M. (2014). Mitigating and adapting to climate change: Multi-functional and multi-scale assessment of green urban infrastructure. *Journal of environmental management*, 146, 107-115.
- Molla, M. B. (2015). The value of urban green infrastructure and its environmental response in urban ecosystem: A literature review. *International Journal of Environmental Sciences*, 4(2), 89-101.
- Fryd, O., Pauleit, S., & Bühler, O. (2012). The role of urban green space and trees in relation to climate change. *CABI Reviews*, (2011), 1-18.
- Pinto, L. V., Inácio, M., Ferreira, C. S. S., Ferreira, A. D., & Pereira, P. (2022). Ecosystem services and well-being dimensions related to urban green spaces—A systematic review. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 85, 104072.
- Bayulken, B., Huisin, D., & Fisher, P. M. (2021). How are nature based solutions helping in the greening of cities in the context of crises such as climate change and pandemics? A comprehensive review. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 288, 125569.
- Chiabai, A., Quiroga, S., Martinez-Juarez, P., Higgins, S., & Taylor, T. (2018). The nexus between climate change, ecosystem services and human health: Towards a conceptual framework. *Science of the total environment*, 635, 1191-1204.
- Ramyar, R. J. A. E., & Zarghami, E. (2017). Green infrastructure contribution for climate change adaptation in urban landscape context. *Applied Ecology & Environmental Research*, 15(3).
- Byrne, J. A., Lo, A. Y., & Jianjun, Y. (2015). Residents' understanding of the role of green infrastructure for climate change adaptation in Hangzhou, China. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 138, 132-143.
- Wolch, J. R., Byrne, J., & Newell, J. P. (2014). Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities 'just green enough'. *Landscape and urban planning*, 125, 234-244.
- Coutts, C., & Hahn, M. (2015). Green infrastructure, ecosystem services, and human health. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 12(8), 9768-9798.
- Van Oijstaeijen, W., Van Passel, S., & Cools, J. (2020). Urban green infrastructure: A review on valuation toolkits from an urban planning perspective. *Journal of environmental management*, 267, 110603.
- Wagner, Madeleine, Christoph Mager, Nicole Schmidt, Nina Kiese, and Anna Growe. "Conflicts about urban green spaces in metropolitan areas under conditions of climate change: A multidisciplinary analysis of stakeholders' perceptions of planning processes." *Urban Science* 3, no. 1 (2019): 15.
- Van den Bosch, M., & Sang, Å. O. (2017). Urban natural environments as nature-based solutions for improved public health—A systematic review of reviews. *Environmental research*, 158, 373-384.
- Bowler, D. E., Buyung-Ali, L., Knight, T. M., & Pullin, A. S. (2010). Urban greening to cool towns and cities: A systematic review of the empirical evidence. *Landscape and urban planning*, 97(3), 147-155.

15. Pillay, S., & Pahlad, R. (2014). A gendered analysis of community perceptions and attitudes towards green spaces in a Durban metropolitan residential area: implications for climate change mitigation. *Agenda*, 28(3), 168-178.
16. Barona, C. O. (2015). Adopting public values and climate change adaptation strategies in urban forest management: A review and analysis of the relevant literature. *Journal of environmental management*, 164, 215-221.
17. Heymans, A., Breadsell, J., Morrison, G. M., Byrne, J. J., & Eon, C. (2019). Ecological urban planning and design: A systematic literature review. *Sustainability*, 11(13), 3723.
18. Fleming, Lora E., Giovanni S. Leonardi, Mathew P. White, Jolyon Medlock, Ian Alcock, Helen L. Macintyre, Kath Maguire et al. "Beyond climate change and health: Integrating broader environmental change and natural environments for public health protection and promotion in the UK." *Atmosphere* 9, no. 7 (2018): 245.
19. Charoenkit, S., & Piyathamrongchai, K. (2019). A review of urban green spaces multifunctionality assessment: A way forward for a standardized assessment and comparability. *Ecological Indicators*, 107, 105592.
20. Shepley, M., Sachs, N., Sadatsafavi, H., Fournier, C., & Peditto, K. (2019). The impact of green space on violent crime in urban environments: an evidence synthesis. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(24), 5119.
21. Childers, D. L., Cadenasso, M. L., Grove, J. M., Marshall, V., McGrath, B., & Pickett, S. T. (2015). An ecology for cities: A transformational nexus of design and ecology to advance climate change resilience and urban sustainability. *Sustainability*, 7(4), 3774-3791.
22. Bellezoni, R. A., Meng, F., He, P., & Seto, K. C. (2021). Understanding and conceptualizing how urban green and blue infrastructure affects the food, water, and energy nexus: A synthesis of the literature. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 289, 125825.
23. Lovell, S. T., & Taylor, J. R. (2013). Supplying urban ecosystem services through multifunctional green infrastructure in the United States. *Landscape ecology*, 28, 1447-1463.
24. Obringer, R., & Nateghi, R. (2021). What makes a city 'smart' in the Anthropocene? A critical review of smart cities under climate change. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 75, 103278.