

June 19, 2012 10:02 pm

Aga Khan Trust: Good for people and the planet

By Sarah Murray

Given the difficulties facing Africa's rapidly expanding urban centres, policy makers might be forgiven for not putting the provision of city parks high on their list of priorities. Yet this is something the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) – the cultural agency of the [Aga Khan Development Network](#) – is focusing on in several African cities.

The trust believes parks are vital public spaces whose social and environmental role goes far beyond offering picnic areas or views.

“Obviously, there are many pressing problems in cities, but parks are not just physical spaces,” says Luis Monreal, general manager of the AKTC. “In reality, these cities need social spaces where different populations can meet at leisure.”

In Cairo, the AKTC has used the site of a 500-year-old dump to create a 30-hectare green space, the Al-Azhar Park, which opened in 2005. More recently, the park project was extended to include the restoration of ancient buildings and the 12th-century Ayyubid wall.

In Bamako, the capital of Mali – a city that is home to more than 1m people – the AKTC has rehabilitated a colonial-era botanical garden built by the French. The park encompasses areas of indigenous flora, open lawns, flower gardens, wooded areas and a medicinal garden, as well as jogging and cycling tracks and nature trails.

More recently, in April, the trust signed an agreement with the Kenyan government to take on the restoration of the Nairobi City Park. The idea is to protect from further encroachment a space that, according to Mr Monreal, has already lost 40 per cent of its territory and to restore the park's physical and ecological infrastructure.

Such projects clearly have environmental benefits. Parks help conserve natural resources and create habitats for wildlife.

“These places are tremendous reservoirs of biodiversity,” says Mr Monreal. “A park can create a microclimate, regulate the rainfall in the city, contribute to aquifers and provide a home to chimpanzees, birds and small mammals.”

In cities, green areas can also mitigate what is known as “urban heat island” – a phenomenon whereby the surfaces of buildings absorb solar radiation and return it to the air as heat.

Trees, shrubs and vegetation not only provide shade but also help reduce city temperatures by returning moisture to the atmosphere, preventing the sun’s heat from being absorbed and retained by buildings.

However, says Mr Monreal, parks serve people, as well as the planet. In addition to providing recreational spaces, he says that they have the potential to become educational resources for schools programmes on ecosystems.

Moreover, in many African cities, open spaces are places that bring together some of the diverse ethnic groups that are increasingly migrating from rural to urban areas.

“This multi-ethnicity can generate friction because people lack knowledge of each other,” he says. “Parks are social spaces where family groups can meet in a relaxed atmosphere at a time of leisure. So in a way they contribute to policies of integration.”