Curb Enthusiasm Episode 10 Transcript

00;00;00;00 - 00;00;04;22
Emily Weidenhof
Welcome to Curb Enthusiasm. I'm Emily Weidenhof

00;00;04;26 - 00;00;05;27
Kyle Gorman
and I'm Kyle Gorman.

00;00;06;03 - 00;00;13;29
Emily Weidenhof
On this episode, we chat with Eric Sanderson, vice president of urban conservation strategy at the New York Botanical Garden.

00;00;14;01 - 00;00;23;11
Kyle Gorman
Eric holds a PhD in ecology from the University of California Davis and is the author of The New York Times best-selling book, Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York City.

00;00;23;13 - 00;00;32;13
Emily Weidenhof
Welcome, Eric, we are so excited to have you today. Thanks for making the trek from the mainland down here, to the tip of the island,

00;00;32;20 - 00;00;35;19
Eric Sanderson
What an honor to come down from the Bronx. Thank you very much.

00;00;35;21 - 00;00;39;23
Emily Weidenhof
Great. So how do you define ecology?

00;00;39;25 - 00;00;47;06
Eric Sanderson
Well, I'm an ecologist. And, if you think about the Greek origins of ecology, it's eco and ology.

00;00;47;06 - 00;01;08;18
Eric Sanderson
And eco comes from oikos, which means home and ology. You know, just like all the other ologies means to study. So, it's the study of home, which I find is a particularly beautiful

definition. Yeah. Natalie also relates to the, the Greek for economics. It's also the same eco economics. It's about, generally economics is the study of the household.

00;01;08;20 - 00;01;30;19
Eric Sanderson
Right. So, the two actually have something in common, and that's interactions. Ecology is all about interactions. So how does this thing interact with that thing. And then what's the consequences for this other thing. And it's inclusive in the interactions it considers. So, all the plants and the animals, all the microbes. And that includes people, of course.

00;01;30;21 - 00;01;48;29
Emily Weidenhof
Absolutely. And I think, a lot of what you're describing is also how we think about our streets here at NYC DOT. Our streets are our front yards, our public space, our community gathering spaces. As well as, you know, important for economic development, freight movement, things like that.

00;01;49;02 - 00;01;50;28
Eric Sanderson
Also, also important for ecology.

00;01;51;00 - 00;01;52;03
Emily Weidenhof
Yes. Yeah.

00;01;52;03 - 00;01;58;01
Emily Weidenhof
So, I was going to ask you, how does transportation kind of fit into your, your ecological work?

00;01;58;08 - 00;02;25;25
Eric Sanderson
Yeah. Well, it's interesting to think about how other organisms in nature get around, like, how they do transportation. You know, I work at the New York Botanical Garden. We are purposeful plant people at the New York Botanical Garden. And plants have a big problem. They're sessile, right? You know, you you're a seed. You root into the place, you actually don't move from that place for the rest of your life, and you succeed or die, depending on your ability to survive there.

00;02;25;28 - 00;02;38;26
Eric Sanderson
But, for trees or flowers or shrubs to get around, they need to have other mechanisms to transport. There are different kinds of seed dispersal. For example, there's wind dispersed seeds.

00;02;38;29 - 00;02;46;06
Emily Weidenhof
There's, everyone with allergies. York City is feeling our high volume of wind, pollinator, trees.

00;02;46;06 - 00;02;51;00
Eric Sanderson
That's right. That's right. That's right. You might. You might hear me, cough a little bit as well.

00;02;51;02 - 00;03;19;00
Eric Sanderson
And then, you know, there are a lot of seeds that hitch their wagon literally to animals, right? So, they have little barbs and little hooks or, you know, there's aquatic plants that have, like, sticky seeds and they stay kind of ducks. And then the ducks fly around them like, go. There's other, you know, the whole reason we have fruit is because of those are attractive to animals who then eat the fruit, and then the seeds pass through the digestive tract of the animal, and the animals moved around, and then they come out.

00;03;19;02 - 00;03;40;29
Eric Sanderson
Or squirrels, you know, that that, you know, gather up nuts and then they bury them, keeping them, you know, for the springtime. But then sometimes they forget, or they die. And so that's actually planting the seeds. So, you know, plants have been very, very, clever about finding ways to use animals and the wind and the climate, also there are floatable seeds to in the water, to move themselves around.

00;03;41;01 - 00;03;52;08
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah. Yeah. And I have read that actually the first streets and roads were not actually human made, but they were made by animals that were going to salt sources.

00;03;52;15 - 00;04;02;29
Eric Sanderson
That's right. Yeah. So, you know, animals, they do move around and, they're moving around to try and find resources and also not to be seen, you know, not to be not to be found by other times.

00;04;02;29 - 00;04;20;26
Eric Sanderson
Right. It's a dangerous world out there. So, keep your eyes open. But yeah, animal tracks are probably what people followed first, right? Because they're both interested in hunting the animals. But also, because they would open up, you know, the, the way to go. And, you know, I've studied a lot the historical ecology of New York City.

00;04;20;26 - 00;04;42;06
Eric Sanderson
And so, an important question for us is where wildlife was moving and where people were moving in the past. It's hard to say, of course, but, you know, there are a few kind of common principles, you know, you don't want to get your feet wet, so you stay out of wetlands if you can know, you want to go the shortest distance you can, you tend to contour, you know, no reason going up around over a hill.

00;04;42;06 - 00;04;57;12
Eric Sanderson
If you could go around a hill, that sort of thing. And so, in the history of New York City, there's all kinds of maps of, indigenous trails, the Lenape trails, and so we've digitized all of those, and then we're contour them to our topography.

00;04;57;15 - 00;04;58;13
Eric Sanderson
Yeah.

00;04;58;15 - 00;05;10;06
Eric Sanderson
And of course, some of those, you know, became the places the colonists used and some of those roads that the colonists used for a while, you know, wagons and that sort of thing eventually became streets, which then became roads.

00;05;10;06 - 00;05;18;07
Eric Sanderson
And so many of the older colonial roads you see on maps are still on our maps today, like Kings Highway in Brooklyn, for example.

00;05;18;10 - 00;05;28;04
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah. And also, I believe at Stuyvesant Street, that is one of the few actual east west streets versus, right up to grid, right?

00;05;28;04 - 00;05;39;02
Eric Sanderson
That's right. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, a lot of that and a lot of the streets down here in lower Manhattan to, you know, follow these kinds of rules, originally, you know, trying to avoid the wetlands, trying to stay on the level.

00;05;39;05 - 00;05;52;11
Eric Sanderson

And that's why it's so cattywampus. And so, there's a way of reading the street cred as a map of the original ecology of the city, particularly, you know, particularly south of the of the grid that was established in 1811 or Manhattan.

00;05;52;17 - 00;05;52;25
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah,

00;05;52;27 - 00;06;01;17
Kyle Gorman
Yeah. I think that's actually a perfect segue into, the conversation about what did the city look like before, it was an actual city in the built environment?

00;06;01;19 - 00;06;26;10
Kyle Gorman
Well, it was a really fantastic place. It's generally true that people establish cities and places that are good for biodiversity, because the same thing that people were looking for, the things that other species are looking for, fresh water, you know, access to transportation, like on the coast. So, defensive places, you know, are also really important and, and translate and technological variation.

00;06;26;13 - 00;06;43;20
Eric Sanderson
And of course, deep soils for agriculture for, you know, modern cities, you know, New York had actually all of those things, right? The reason the Dutch established on lower Manhattan is because it was right next to this great deep harbor that had been carved up by the glaciers and by geological events over millions of years.

00;06;43;22 - 00;07;04;01
Eric Sanderson
They wanted a protected place, right? And so, you know, they had water on three sides that access to deeper soils in what's now New Jersey and Brooklyn and Queens. And then there was freshwater. There was the Collect Pond in lower Manhattan. So that was very close. There was an old kettle pond. So, you had all these things that led the city.

00;07;04;01 - 00;07;24;26
Eric Sanderson
And then once you establish a city, the easiest way for your city to grow is as adjacent to that city. Right? So that's what put us on Manhattan. And of course, that's what created the density. So that's one, one way to talk about the question about what the city was like in the past. And another way to say it is, you know, we're a low coastal city, right?

00;07;24;28 - 00;07;44;05
Eric Sanderson

We're in the mid-latitudes. You know, we have, kind of generally aquatic kind of climate or it rains about four inches of precipitation every month, all year long, every month. So that means that we we're a forest. So, most of the landscapes were forest, and we had lots of wetlands. We had tidal wetlands and the intertidal zone.

00;07;44;07 - 00;08;07;22
Eric Sanderson
We had freshwater wetlands in the upland zone. We had streams and ponds and springs. We had grasslands, that were mostly created by the Lenape people, by Native Americans who were lighting fires to open up grasslands for, for their own purposes, for farming or for hunting purposes. So, it was a really diverse landscape for many different kinds of ecosystems.

00;08;07;25 - 00;08;28;04
Eric Sanderson
You know, it depends on how you count. We count about 97 different ecological communities across the whole city. Yeah. Really, really diverse place. And also, we're an estuarine city. We're on a big estuary right where the saltwater and the freshwater are mixing. And that's those are some of the most productive ecosystems in the world, and huge variation.

00;08;28;04 - 00;08;39;15
Eric Sanderson
So, it's no surprise to me that a city of huge productivity and abundance and diversity grew up out of the ecological, you know, productivity, abundance and diversity of this landscape.

00;08;39;22 - 00;08;40;15
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah.

00;08;40;18 - 00;08;48;25
Kyle Gorman
Your answer really reminds me of what my AP world history teacher always used to say is that the most important part of the most successful cities in the world are warm water seaports

00;08;48;28 - 00;08;55;06
Kyle Gorman
So yeah, shout out to Miss Wetzel from 15 years ago. I still hold on to that anecdote.

00;08;55;08 - 00;09;00;09
Eric Sanderson
It's so true. It's so true. And, you know, relatively protected one too, right?

00;09;00;09 - 00;09;03;08
Kyle Gorman
I know the most strategic port in the world is probably the New York Harbor.

00;09;03;08 - 00;09;12;15
Eric Sanderson
Yeah. That's right, that's right. When people ask me what the city was like, you know, I used to, most of my work is about trying to imagine what it was like right before Europeans got here.

00;09;12;17 - 00;09;30;02
Eric Sanderson
But in this new book I've been working on Before New York, the history goes way deeper than that. So, one of the things I write about is how, you know, that terminal moraine from the last glaciation when it crossed Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island, and there was a big flood event, glacial flood event, about 12,000 13,000 years ago.

00;09;30;04 - 00;09;43;04
Eric Sanderson
That blew out the narrows it created that that conduit that that was so important, you know, the subsequent history of the city. But before them, the water had to either go around Staten Island or had to go out Long Island Sound. There was no way through, right?

00;09;43;06 - 00;09;43;17
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah.

00;09;43;20 - 00;09;51;01
Eric Sanderson
Yeah. So, so when we when we think about nature, you know, it's not like there's only the nature before and the nature after.

00;09;51;08 - 00;10;11;01
Eric Sanderson
The nature before was changing all the time. You know, studies of pollen, you know, that help you understand what the vegetation was like at different points in time. And, you know, right after the glaciers, there was no vegetation here, right? It was just bare rock. And then there was a process of primary succession and then several different kinds of forest.

00;10;11;01 - 00;10;30;20
Eric Sanderson
Until eventually got to the sort of oak tree forest that was here and in 1609. And I remember reading a study in graduate school about at the height of the glaciers, those oak trees were

in the equivalent of Georgia. Right. And they had to get back up here in order for that many oak trees here in 1609.

00;10;30;22 - 00;10;48;02
Eric Sanderson
And they did a study. If you just had oak acorns that just fell off the tree, then they would have gotten to Virginia in that amount of time, they wouldn't have even been here. And so, the hypothesis is that that the squirrels were actually making the difference. The squirrels and the blue jays, you know, that were moving at just that little bit farther than just the edge of the tree line.

00;10;48;04 - 00;10;53;08
Eric Sanderson
And eventually, you know, that mediated transportation is what enabled our hickory forest to form.

00;10;53;10 - 00;11;11;25
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah. Are there specific examples in New York City about, a trajectory of growth or development that you as an ecologist, see, very obviously why something was developed in a certain way because of the kind of underlying ecology?

00;11;11;28 - 00;11;16;12
Eric Sanderson
You see patterns, you know, like a lot of the freshwater wetlands.

00;11;16;14 - 00;11;32;01
Eric Sanderson
They persisted for a long time. A lot of them precedents persisted into the 19th century because they were too wet to build on. And so, they kind of hung out. And then, you know, people started put coverage on them and then and then pollution and then people complained and then they got filled in and then we built over them.

00;11;32;01 - 00;11;51;29
Eric Sanderson
Right. And so that's why a lot of our houses are in wet spots. Forests is a story often of, keeping little wood lots around and clearing forests. And I tell eventually, you know, you need a more wood to keep yourself warm and you chop down the trees or to build the houses, and then the wood lots probably disappeared.

00;11;51;29 - 00;12;14;19
Eric Sanderson
And, you know, a lot of the city was agriculture for a couple of hundred years, and it was really transportation in the end, that really sealed the fate of those agricultural fields into

becoming urbanized areas. Right. You know, once you extend the subway or the streetcars that allow someone to be able to get back into the center of the city and, and then those areas shifted from agriculture to housing.

00;12;14;21 - 00;12;45;26
Eric Sanderson
Yeah. There's a there's interesting things around, salt marshes, you know, salt marshes again persisted often into the 20th century. And that was in part because they were economically valuable for the colonies for a long time. They used to harvest the salt marsh hay for fodder for horses and cows and that sort of thing. And then, you know, they didn't really have a mechanism to bury them, to fill them in until we developed, you know, fossil fuels and industrial, you know, bulldozers and this sort of thing.

00;12;45;28 - 00;13;06;10
Eric Sanderson
And so, you know, if you look at where our airports are, they're on top of salt marshes or in the bay and why it why is that, you know, why did they not put them someplace higher? It's because there are people living in all the higher places, right? In the 1920s and 1930s, 1940s, when at the time we decided we wanted to have commercial aviation, the only big flat places left were in the salt marshes.

00;13;06;13 - 00;13;23;20
Eric Sanderson
And so that's why JFK is built on top of big salt marsh. That's why LaGuardia airport, same, you know, in Bowery Bay, basically, Newark Airport, same thing. The Newark Meadows were a big salt marsh, actually, if you sort of, you know, in your mind, think about all the airports and coastal cities, they're almost all on top of wetlands.

00;13;23;20 - 00;13;30;06
Eric Sanderson
And now they're all subject to sea level rise and storm surge and, you know, resiliency issues.

00;13;30;08 - 00;13;56;05
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah, I would say the converse of that is, the development, that D O T has done for many, many years along Broadway where, you know, it had been a very, heavy vehicular trafficked corridor. And we've been able to really transform it for pedestrians and cyclists and return it to its original footpath origins.

00;13;56;06 - 00;13;56;21
Eric Sanderson
Right.

00;13;56;21 - 00;14;06;27
Emily Weidenhof
And that is a case where we are we're getting a lot of value out of, you know, recognizing and returning it to its original use.

00;14;07;00 - 00;14;19;02
Eric Sanderson
Right, right, right. Well, you know, this is one of the wonderful things about nature is, nature is not constant. Right? All those things, the forest, the wetlands, the streams are all constantly evolving depending on the pressures that are on them.

00;14;19;05 - 00;14;39;25
Eric Sanderson
And they adapt. And so, you know, in the same way we can adapt our city. There are so many analogies between the way nature works and the way cities work. There are also legacy effects, right? So, you know, one generation does something and then the next generation decides that's not what they want until they try and change it. But now they're kind of limited in what they can do, or it's harder to do what they're going to do.

00;14;39;27 - 00;14;53;00
Eric Sanderson
Same thing. There are these strong legacies that work in nature that, you know, try and keep things on the same path until often you have a disturbance event that pushes it and then kind of gives out an opportunity for the system to, to reset itself.

00;14;53;03 - 00;14;55;15
Kyle Gorman
Change is the only constant in New York.

00;14;55;17 - 00;14;56;10
Eric Sanderson
That's right. Yeah.

00;14;56;10 - 00;14;59;03
Eric Sanderson
And the only thing only constant in nature too. Right?

00;14;59;05 - 00;14;59;16
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah.

00;14;59;16 - 00;15;13;28
Kyle Gorman

We've talked a lot about the past, which as you sort of alluded to, really informs the present. Is there anything that essentially was ignored that could have been better factored into some of the planning, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in the development of New York City?

00;15;13;29 - 00;15;22;11
Eric Sanderson
Yeah, I think there's so many things that we can look in retrospect and say were maybe probably not the right way to have developed our city.

00;15;22;13 - 00;15;44;25
Eric Sanderson
Of course, I think the primary example that is probably cars and the decisions that were made in the early 20th century to, you know, sort of preclude other ways of getting around. You know, we invested a lot in the subways, of course. So that was a good move. And it's interesting to think about why that happened when it did and, and the thinking that was around the idea of a five-borough city and that it needed these five borough institutions to hold us together.

00;15;44;27 - 00;16;05;08
Eric Sanderson
But, you know, that sort of replacement of a lot of that public, infrastructure, you know, streetcars, I think particularly surface streetcars, with the automobile, you know, I think was one of the things that really have limited us, going forward, just because, you know, cars are just so inefficient as a way of getting around.

00;16;05;08 - 00;16;21;17
Eric Sanderson
Too much space, too few people. You know, and in a city where space is at such a premium, it seems like that's a kind of a shame. That was probably not the right, right decision at the time. And but, you know, I think these are the kinds of things that we're working on changing now, right?

00;16;21;19 - 00;16;53;19
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah, definitely, and something, you know, we here at D.O.T. work on all the time is that there are also there's just a huge city that's been built up over reliance on automobiles. And so, as we think about how we transition and create a smoother runway to more sustainable and active modes of transportation, like, we also have to actively acknowledge that we still get tremendously high volume of our packages via freight and large trucks.

00;16;53;21 - 00;17;00;29
Emily Weidenhof
So, it's a there's a lot of shaping the systems, beyond what we see on the street.

00;17;01;03 - 00;17;22;07
Eric Sanderson
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. You know, I wrote a book after Mannahatta that's about the linkages between oil cars and suburbs, and it's trying to sort of take an ecological look at something that's traditionally seen as sort of an economic set of decisions, you know, like we live in a country in the United States that at one time was the Saudi Arabia of oil, before there was Saudi Arabia with its oil, we had most of the oil.

00;17;22;07 - 00;17;50;01
Eric Sanderson
Right. And, and, you know, because of fracking, we're sort of back in that mode again. And that having such abundant cheap energy, you know, there were times in Oklahoma and Texas for water was more expensive than oil, you know, because it was just such an abundance of it, led us to make all these decisions around, you know, fossil fuel driven transportation and industry and so forth, that we're still, you know, still laboring under, and then that led us to a certain kind of land use.

00;17;50;01 - 00;18;07;01
Eric Sanderson
And then if you sort of think about it, that that those have backward positive reinforcements, right? You know, once you buy a house that's 30 miles away from where you live and then, you know, you have to have a car, and then if you have a car, you have to have oil on that. You know, so much explains so much of the politics of my entire life, right?

00;18;07;04 - 00;18;18;28
Eric Sanderson
And you could see, as the oil supplies start to go down, how that created disruptions, you know, like the oil shocks of the 70s and how those were related to recessions and so forth and so on.

00;18;18;28 - 00;18;36;26
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah, I think another piece of the puzzle that we think a lot about, and you mentioned Earth Day, is the transformative impact of short-term events to just really get people out of the day to day and reimagine what their streets could be.

00;18;36;29 - 00;19;06;06
Emily Weidenhof
Commissioner Rodriguez, here, established, you know, formerly as council member, Car Free Earth Day. And that's something thanks to Kyle and the whole public realm team have really scaled up, over the years with so many amazing people at D.O.T.. And there we just see, an opportunity to, in a light touch, but very high impact way to get people to see different possibilities, and different future for their streets in their city.

00;19;06;12 - 00;19;08;17
Eric Sanderson
Totally, totally. You have to experience it, right?

00;19;08;23 - 00;19;08;26
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah.

00;19;08;26 - 00;19;11;11
Eric Sanderson
And then it's so great once you do experience it.

00;19;11;15 - 00;19;22;13
Kyle Gorman
When you take all the cars away, you see how much space there is. And it's also fun when we permanently transform spaces. People don't even remember what it was like before. They assumed it had always been that way.

00;19;22;13 - 00;19;22;25
Eric Sanderson
Right.

00;19;22;26 - 00;19;27;04
Kyle Gorman
That's always a more interesting observation., I've noticed.

00;19;27;06 - 00;19;28;24
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah. The best compliment we can get.

00;19;28;24 - 00;19;36;02
Kyle Gorman
Right? Or when they immediately sit in the chair, when you put it out after all the fights to get the plaza. And yeah, and then it's there and the people are set.

00;19;36;04 - 00;19;37;20
Eric Sanderson
Yeah. That's wonderful.

00;19;37;22 - 00;19;41;18
Emily Weidenhof
Hey, listeners, we hope you're enjoying this episode of our podcast.

00;19;41;20 - 00;19;58;26
Emily Weidenhof
For those of you who are as enthusiastic about transportation and planning as we are, we'd like to hear from you. You can submit topics and questions that you'd like us to cover at nyc.gov/curb enthusiasm. And now back to our conversation.

00;19;58;28 - 00;20;27;15
Emily Weidenhof
Pivoting to the future. A lot of, folks here at D O T are thinking about using, the waterways, particularly for our Blue Highways initiative, getting more efficiency, delivering goods on the water, but then being able to instead of, delivering them via truck, having a more, environmentally sustainable goal type mode of transportation, also a safer mode of transportation like cargo bikes.

00;20;27;17 - 00;20;28;08
Eric Sanderson
Right.

00;20;28;08 - 00;20;34;15
Emily Weidenhof
What does the future of New York City look like to an ecologist?

00;20;34;17 - 00;20;48;24
Eric Sanderson
Well, actually, just yesterday I was at the Waterfront Alliance conference, and they asked me to talk about what will the city look like in 50 years in 2075, they were thinking about the waterfront. And there was a lot of talk about blue highways there.

00;20;48;27 - 00;21;07;27
Eric Sanderson
So, you know, one thing is, of course, we're going to have more water, in the future, right? What have been a more ocean and less land. And so, I think we have to accommodate that as we think about what the infrastructure is going to be. You know, the whole reason why we have more water is because the climate is altered and the climate is altered because of fossil fuel use.

00;21;07;27 - 00;21;30;23
Eric Sanderson
So, you know, I think that's a really important part of this, is that we have to continue to work on the mitigation side and try and use less or less energy, less fossil fuel generated energy that makes greenhouse gases. The thing that I said that I think, maybe is most important is that we have to imagine how the city is part of nature, not separate from nature.

00;21;30;26 - 00;21;53;09
Eric Sanderson
And then nature isn't something that's we've added on to the city that we restore in the city, but actually that where city exists within nature. And so, everything we need to do needs to be in compatibility with the nature of the place. Obviously, we're an archipelago in an estuary as a city. So, you know, I think water-based transportation makes a lot of sense.

00;21;53;11 - 00;22;08;04
Eric Sanderson
But I will say that there's more we can do with the space. Like if we can make these efficiency gains about the transportation space, then that leaves that space to do other kinds of things with, you know, like a little bit during Covid, you know, we saw the restaurants move out, you know, and use some of that space.

00;22;08;04 - 00;22;29;26
Eric Sanderson
I think that was a really valuable lesson about what can be done. Ecologically, you know, if you're looking for space in the public realm, the right of way is the place to look for, and so, you know, having modes of transportation that can be compatible with nature at the same time with trees and grass and shrubs. And then if you plant native trees, grass and shrubs, then you're going to get native insects.

00;22;29;26 - 00;22;45;24
Eric Sanderson
They'll bring back native birds. And so, you can start to, you know, roll out an imagined city that would be greener, more resilient and more pleasant, to move around and maybe even get to where you want to go faster than you. And you can now, right?

00;22;46;00 - 00;22;51;02
Emily Weidenhof
Absolutely. We have a great partnership with the Horticulture Society of New York.

00;22;51;05 - 00;23;17;16
Emily Weidenhof
They help manage and maintain a lot of our high need plazas across the city to make sure that every neighborhood in New York City has access to high quality public space. And one of the really great efforts, that they are collaborating with, Rutgers University, is a study about native bee species. And going back to your earlier point about animals' kind of needing the same things as people.

00;23;17;16 - 00;23;18;00
Eric Sanderson
Yeah

00;23;18;00 - 00;23;27;05
Emily Weidenhof
That's what a lot of, the study and the conversation is about, you know, bee moms need a good, safe, stable home.

00;23;27;10 - 00;23;28;07
Kyle Gorman
Bee Hotels, as we call them.

00;23;29;17 - 00;23;30;04
Eric Sanderson
Yeah, sure.

00;23;30;04 - 00;23;31;18
Emily Weidenhof
They need access to food.

00;23;31;19 - 00;23;32;21
Eric Sanderson
Right.

00;23;32;21 - 00;23;40;14
Emily Weidenhof
And they need a safe place to raise their kids. So. not so, so different from New Yorkers.

00;23;40;14 - 00;23;40;27
Eric Sanderson
Right. Right, that’s right, that’s right. Habitat, right?

00;23;40;27 - 00;23;40;27
Emily Weidenhof
Exactly.

00;23;40;27 - 00;23;56;04
Eric Sanderson
It all comes back to ecology. I’ve often thought that the success to urban planning would have been to make a city that works like a forest, but it has a lot of people in it. Right? You know, if you were to sort of set the, set the bar, that would be success in my book, right?

00;23;56;07 - 00;23;59;25
Eric Sanderson

00;23;59;27 - 00;24;16;09

Eric Sanderson
That you have, you know, great jobs and you have housing, and you have schools, you have all the things we love about the city, but that it, you know, process sets carbon, and it manages water and it provides habitat for these other critters the same way a forest would. The way the forest did that was here 400 years ago.

00;24;16;11 - 00;24;23;27
Eric Sanderson
And frankly, the forest that will be here again someday in the future, right. You know, if you just leave any empty lot in New York City, what does it go back to?

00;24;23;27 - 00;24;26;22
Eric Sanderson
It goes back to wanting to be a forest.

00;24;26;24 - 00;24;37;13
Kyle Gorman
It's funny you say that. We were just talking about that this morning at our staff meeting, and how a lot of unoccupied or vacant lots basically become green spaces and naturally, completely unplanned.

00;24;37;15 - 00;24;40;22
Eric Sanderson
Right? Right, right, right. Nature doesn't know about a vacancy, right?

00;24;40;23 - 00;24;41;08
Kyle Gorman
No, it does not!

00;24;41;08 - 00;24;51;04
Emily Weidenhof
They don't check the city tax map before they pollenate.

00;24;51;06 - 00;25;06;17
Eric Sanderson
And same way I, you know I, I've been working a lot with D E P the Department of Environmental Protection on cloudburst projects around flooding because, you know, one of the effects of climate change is we're getting these much more intense rain events, and, you know, rain when it falls on, asphalt or sidewalk street,

00;25;06;17 - 00;25;22;27
Eric Sanderson
It's like falling on a rock, right? And the water runs right off. And so, it creates flood conditions. And so, you know, the more that we can make our transportation work and at

the same time make our city more pervious, the better off will be in terms of flooding and flood mitigation and the future.

00;25;23;04 - 00;25;32;03
Emily Weidenhof
Exactly. And if we look at, you know, D O T as having a little over a quarter of all the city's land area as streets.

00;25;32;07 - 00;25;32;13
Eric Sanderson
Right.

00;25;32;14 - 00;25;46;24
Emily Weidenhof
It's a lot of asphalt, a lot of concrete, and a place where we can make a lot of gains in terms of greening and absorption, and a safer, more enjoyable ecosystem for all creatures in New York City. mean,

00;25;46;29 - 00;26;05;14
Eric Sanderson
And, you know, I think this is something that we can all sort of share, right? Like, it strikes me not being a person in government, that that's a place where, you know, the Parks Department and D O T and the D E P and the city planning folks can all sort of come around to a common agreement about how to manage that space in a way that works, for everyone.

00;26;05;16 - 00;26;27;05
Eric Sanderson
One of the things I see as an urban ecologist is that, you know, nature wants to work at the landscape scale like water, wants to work in watersheds. You know, species want to work in home ranges. These things have nothing to do with the way property lines are drawn, or jurisdictions are drawn. And by the same token, our property and our jurisdictions don't reflect at all what nature means.

00;26;27;05 - 00;26;34;06
Eric Sanderson
And so that creates the sort of fundamental disconnect that's hard to solve, right? And so, you know,

00;26;34;11 - 00;26;51;09
Emily Weidenhof
Just as challenging as trying to explain to a community that, oh, well, the community board line ends there, or the precinct line ends there, or the borough line ends there. Yeah, we have quite a few plazas that, cover both span two boroughs.

00;26;51;12 - 00;26;52;04
Eric Sanderson
Right, right of course.

00;26;52;11 - 00;27;00;05
Emily Weidenhof
Trying to break down some of those, invisible but very powerful barriers that don't actually make sense to people living and using our streets.

00;27;00;09 - 00;27;20;24
Eric Sanderson
That's right, and of course, you know, many of these things are legacies of our colonization, right? You know, I think about that all the time. You know, the city of New York, you know, was named after this guy in England that had never came here and didn't know anything about the place, you know, in the state of New York because, you know, descended from the colony of New York.

00;27;20;27 - 00;27;43;24
Eric Sanderson
You know, people talk about decolonization, but it's actually kind of really deeply rooted in our way of thinking about the world, you know? I'm not an indigenous person, but why I'm interested in studying the way the indigenous people lived in the same landscape, because you could talk about them like, you know, living here in lower Manhattan for thousands of years.

00;27;43;26 - 00;28;07;25
Eric Sanderson
And in a way that actually supported and arguably increased the biodiversity of the place. And the same places were walking around and using today. And so, you know, without being heavy handed, just the contrast between those two things, and the kind of humility that they had about their environment and their relationship to the environment, I think that's those are very good lessons for us here in the 21st century.

00;28;07;28 - 00;28;24;01
Kyle Gorman
Our colonial history is everywhere around us, even the street names, Wall Street, you know, all the right named roads in Brooklyn and beyond. So, it's so starkly in your face. Whereas the multi thousand-year history is and isn't may be as apparent. Sometimes and often overlooked.

00;28;24;03 - 00;28;30;07
Eric Sanderson

One of the things I've been doing in the book is, you know, trying to work on the naming history of streams and wetlands and things.

00;28;30;07 - 00;28;47;26
Eric Sanderson
And, you know, for some places we have indigenous names and then we have a Dutch name, and then we'll have an English or American name. And there's this really nice guy who's a Lenape place name expert who speaks Munsee. And we were talking about the Lenape names for some of the places.

00;28;47;29 - 00;29;17;00
Eric Sanderson
And he pointed out, you know, they're all descriptive for the most part. You know, like the, The Running Stream or the Green Marsh or whatever it is. But so many of the column colonization names are people's names, you know, you know, so-and-so's wetland or so-and-so's stream. Some early colonist, you know, and how he said to me, we would never think to name it after that, you know, because people are temporary, but the stream is there forever.

00;29;17;02 - 00;29;18;22
Emily Weidenhof
I love that

00;29;18;25 - 00;29;19;09
Kyle Gorman
Poetic.

00;29;19;14 - 00;29;44;27
Eric Sanderson
I know, I know, I mean, I think this is what decolonization means. Is actually, you know, not wiping away, because there's also good things that have come over the last 400 years and many things I love about our city. But how do we, like, work back in, these much more important ideas about our relationship to the environment that are full of kindness and humility and, and, generosity, right?

00;29;44;29 - 00;29;48;25
Eric Sanderson
That it's not just about us, but it's about all the things that live on the planet with us.

00;29;48;28 - 00;30;07;02
Emily Weidenhof
Absolutely. We were just having some great conversations at our recent Equity in Motion conference, very focused on equity and there were quite a few people talking about, you

know, thinking about planning work and thinking about transportation work as an ecosystem.

00;30;07;04 - 00;30;34;11
Emily Weidenhof
And I think one of the things that does is that it puts us in a frame of mind that the ecosystem is everyone and everything. So, we're not just talking about one mode or one agency or one government, but we are starting to use language that really can place everybody in everything within that context. And hopefully help start to shift our thinking and planning.

00;30;34;11 - 00;30;35;10
Eric Sanderson
Right, right.

00;30;35;12 - 00;30;48;18
Emily Weidenhof
You know, are there things that you think, as an ecologist, transportation planners could be more mindful or intentional about integrating into our planning and initiatives?

00;30;48;20 - 00;31;16;15
Eric Sanderson
Yeah. Well, I mean, we talked a bit about climate mitigation and adaptation, but those sorts of things, which I'm sure you're already talking about. But maybe more fundamentally, you know, if transportation is about interactions and ecologies is about interactions, you can talk about the kinds of interactions that that we study in ecology, things like, competition, you know, competition is an important idea, how we set up the rules of the road for competition, rules of the road, so to speak.

00;31;16;17 - 00;31;37;16
Eric Sanderson
But also, mutualism and symbiosis. You know, it used to be in ecology that we thought really competition, structured communities. But there's sort of this new way of thinking that says that it's actually cooperation more that structures how communities work. And I think that that's a really important idea for us. You know, how do we find the solutions that - basically a symbiosis is a win win.

00;31;37;16 - 00;31;50;17
Eric Sanderson
You know, you do something that I benefit from, and I do something you benefit from. And, and that's how we succeed together. And I think that's a really strong model for how we make a better city and how we make about our transportation system.

00;31;50;19 - 00;31;58;02

Kyle Gorman
Yeah. I think that's the most interesting thing about ecology to me, is that it's both symbiotic and competitive all at the same time.

00;31;58;02 - 00;32;17;27
Kyle Gorman
And how do you really balance something that's sort of working in tandem but also theoretically against it as well. So that's what's always been interesting to me in this sort of study of ecology and a system of systems, and it's sort of just an infinite amount of systems that exist in the same universe at a parallel time.

00;32;17;27 - 00;32;18;23
Eric Sanderson
Right, right, right.

00;32;18;26 - 00;32;32;15
Kyle Gorman
Moving on to the system of etiquette, what would you say is your biggest breach of public transit etiquette? Either one that you do yourself or maybe that you observe, in your travels around New York?

00;32;32;15 - 00;32;38;05
Eric Sanderson
I think the thing that I, that I feel most guilty about is I live on City Island up in the Bronx.

00;32;38;05 - 00;32;38;24
Kyle Gorman
Great seafood!

00;32;38;29 - 00;33;01;00
Eric Sanderson
Great seafood. There is a bus. There's the BX29 bus that takes you to Pelham Bay station. If I wanted to get to work from where I live, on public transportation, it would be the BX29 to the BX12 and then a long walk to my office. So, I, like most few people of the island, drive, even though I wish I didn't have to,

00;33;01;03 - 00;33;17;13
Eric Sanderson
Good weather, I'll ride my bike, you know, as we talked about. But, you know, in the middle of winter, I don't really want to ride my bike. And also, in the heat of summer, it's not my favorite time. I talk about this all the time with my City Island neighbors, right? Because we wish the ferry would come, at least some of us wish the ferry would come.

00;33;17;13 - 00;33;33;22

Eric Sanderson
Those people on City Island, who don't want the ferry to come, the reason why is they're worried about parking, because they think they'll attract other people to come and then park on the island. And then, because everybody has to have a car, that's on City Island and they won't be able to park the car, you know, it's just it's just the same thing.

00;33;33;24 - 00;33;51;28
Eric Sanderson
And City Island doesn't really have enough density that it can hold. You know, we have a small grocery store, but we don't have a big grocery store, you know, all these sorts of things. Right? Like, because of the sort of, environmental conditions or such, it leads people to make the decisions they do. And then, of course, there's all the other incentives why people want to have cars.

00;33;52;00 - 00;34;10;02
Eric Sanderson
And so, that's the thing I wish I had a better solution for. I would be very happy to ride a streetcar or ride a bus if it didn't require like, three changes, you know, but, but that's, you know, that's just my little circumstance. But this is, I think your problem too, right?

00;34;10;02 - 00;34;18;09
Eric Sanderson
Is you're trying to create the general system that has to serve all these very specific individual circumstances. And how do we do that? Right.

00;34;18;09 - 00;34;18;16
Emily Weidenhof
Yeah.

00;34;18;16 - 00;34;20;01
Kyle Gorman
How do you create a system for everyone?

00;34;20;05 - 00;34;20;25
Eric Sanderson
Yeah. That's right.

00;34;20;25 - 00;34;21;15
Kyle Gorman
It's very hard.

00;34;21;15 - 00;34;23;12
Eric Sanderson
It's very, very difficult yeah.

00;34;23;14 - 00;34;29;25
Emily Weidenhof
Eric, what are you most enthusiastic about the future of transportation?

00;34;29;28 - 00;34;37;24
Eric Sanderson
Well, I have to say, I've been completely amazed by the transformation I've seen in New York City over the course of my time here in the last 25 years.

00;34;37;26 - 00;34;54;16
Eric Sanderson
The new bike lanes, the number of people that are actually using those bike lanes, and I actually, I'm particularly pleased when I'm down here in the city to see how much that's taken hold and how many, how many people are going. I think congestion pricing was an amazing thing. And I know it was very hard fought.

00;34;54;16 - 00;35;15;17
Eric Sanderson
And it's still, you know, still being argued about and discussed, but it seems to me like it's been a big success. I just wish we could be even more about it, you know? I mean, the only thing I don't like about congestion pricing is, again, it's sort of feeding into the inequity of our city that's, you know, if you're wealthy enough to buy out of it, you can buy out of it.

00;35;15;20 - 00;35;18;17
Eric Sanderson
Which is a little bit of our American problem writ large, right?

00;35;18;21 - 00;35;19;28
Emily Weidenhof
Yes. Yeah.

00;35;20;00 - 00;35;30;18
Eric Sanderson
But I never thought when I moved here, I would see the kind of changes that I've seen. So. And I think that's a lot to do with the leadership here in your agency at D O T, so congratulations.

00;35;30;20 - 00;35;31;03
Kyle Gorman
Thank you.

00;35;31;05 - 00;35;34;22
Emily Weidenhof

Yeah. But, thank you so much for joining us today.

00;35;34;22 - 00;35;37;24
Emily Weidenhof
I really appreciate all of your insight and perspective.

00;35;37;25 - 00;35;45;21
Eric Sanderson
Well thank you. There's a lot of, my friends who are purposeful plant people that would love to help you do your transportation thing, so just let us know.

00;35;45;23 - 00;35;47;11
Emily Weidenhof
Great.

00;35;47;14 - 00;35;56;23
NYC DOT Commissioner Ydanis Rodriguez
Hi. My name is Ydanis Rodriguez, commissioner of the New York City Department of Transportation. Thank you for listening to Curb Enthusiasm by New York City DOT. This episode was produced by Michael Santos with video support from Sigurjon Gudjonsson, and Juan Vega.

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