

Seeing the Forest for the Cities with Scott Francisco

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SPEAKERS

Scott Francisco, Greg Lindsay

G Greg Lindsay 00:24

Hello and welcome to threesixtyCITY by NewCities, a podcast delving into the future of urban life. I'm your host, Greg Lindsay. All too often cities are perceived as the opposite of nature, or at least in need of more natural features such as parks and green buildings. But the relationship between cities and their hinterlands is far more nuanced and complex. A more urban world is also a greener one, as land preserved from development acts as a cooling force and carbon sink in a warming world. This week, we're joined by Cities4Forest Scott Francisco to talk about the urban forest-continuum, his experiences at COP 26, and his plans to rewild Brooklyn Bridge, among others. Thanks so much for joining us, Scott.

G Greg Lindsay 01:02

I'm glad we could count on you to join us as we do this on the eve of Thanksgiving in the United States. It's great to connect with a fellow Montrealer as well. I guess as a place to start, our last episode was also live from COP26. A few weeks ago, we were talking with Chante Harris about her experiences on the ground in Glasgow, and you were there for the full two weeks as well, doing activations, speaking with journalists and others. And I'm curious about the tenor of your conversations there. Because if I recall, early in COP, one of the biggest successes was a commitment by the world's governments to preserve forests. And so what was the sense of hope and optimism and connections that you got from your time there?

S Scott Francisco 01:02

Thanks for having me.

S Scott Francisco 01:40

Well, that was a great moment for us. I was there representing Cities4Forests and we're a network of cities from all over the world. There's about 80 cities in our network, and all of those cities have committed to taking action on forests, both inside their cities, around their cities, and also even far away from their cities. So that's the Cities4Forests mission is to engage cities in the fight against deforestation for one thing, but also bringing forests and their benefits into the hearts and minds and onto the streets of cities. So that declaration, the Glasgow Declaration on Forests and Land Use was a major moment. And in fact, it happened early on so in all of our subsequent conversations we were able to refer back to it and say, look what everyone's committed to, 247 countries, what are you as a city going to do to participate in this?

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Greg Lindsay 02:34

Interesting, can you talk a bit more about the vision for Cities4Forests as well, as I mentioned in the opening remarks, a lot of the focus is on rewilding cities, like how do we make cities themselves greener. You took the opposite approach from the beginning, which is really about rethinking that whole relationship between cities and their hinterlands, which I think is totally ignored in the global city discourse. I mean, I've written about networks of cities talking to each other while ignoring their further hinterlands, and there's problems with this at every level. So how did you originally approach this problem about thinking through what has historically been a much better known connection, right? We think of cities and building aqueducts and really being connected to the natural resources in their watersheds. What motivated you to create Cities4Forests? And what problems were you trying to solve?

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Scott Francisco 03:18

Great, big question. So, I come to this as an architect on one hand, and someone who loves to build and design, and as an urbanist who really believes in the city as a place of human flourishing, and with all the benefits that cities can have. But I've also grown up as a lover of nature and a student of natural systems. And those two interests and professional commitments have combined, where I began to see more and more that cities and urbanists like ourselves too easily ignored where all this stuff comes from. Everything that a city is, and has, and presides over, and creates is really being processed from somewhere else. And so, a city in that sense is a node in this global network of flows. When cities take on, say, urban greening projects, which are wonderful and have tremendous benefits. But in a way, there's kind of a dark side to that, which is if the forests and trees in our streets in New York or Montreal are looking good, and we've got lots of green space, we're sort of solving this problem and in fact, far, far, far from it. In fact, in terms of benefits of biodiversity and climate, urban forests have a very small role to play in the big picture. Whereas the power of cities as consumers and creators and influencers is tremendous over the global landscape, in the way that we buy products, and so forth. So I really wanted to take that narrative and sort of flip it around and say, how can cities impact the great forests of the world? Well, frankly, so that we can survive on this planet.

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Greg Lindsay 05:18

The network of cities you created, how do they interact with each other? How are they thinking about their relationship with forests? At least over the last decade or so, a lot of interests about

how do we preserve forests, right, there was the notion that we need to financialize them, that we could basically use them as carbon sinks, I believe there is now actually a DAO that's trying to create a cryptocurrency around forest as well, which is kind of perverse in its own way, issue tokens to save the forests. And at the same time, the Atlantic Council created this sort of Chief Heat Officer position. So there's a lot of interest about like, how do we create public officials that steward the public realm? Who are you talking to in cities? Like, who does the remit of forestry fall under, typically it'd be parks departments, but I'm curious, what kind of conversations are happening and who's having them?

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Scott Francisco 06:02

Again, great question. Because the way that municipal governments are set up, it doesn't really favor this idea of influence at a great distance. Cities are very complex entities to manage, so there's a lot to take care of just within our boundaries, things like parks and urban trees, etc. So typically in a city you'll have multiple layers of governance and policy around green spaces, and increasingly things like green infrastructure, which is great. So green infrastructure would be really thinking of green space in a city as part of its functioning infrastructure, things like water flood management, the heat island effect, and we can start to monetize those things and actually create line items that we couldn't have previously had to support better greenspace in our cities. However, when we're talking about the great forests of the world, and in particular, the tropical forests, we know that those are responsible for about 10% of direct emissions, that are impacting climate change. So that's a big chunk of our global emissions that are coming directly from deforestation. Now, cities are also the great consumers of the world. So depending on the data you look at, you're talking about 70 to 80% of the world's emissions related consumption is coming from cities. That's huge, right? So when you look at those two numbers, you can see that it's the activities of cities, the behavior of residents, governments, companies, and institutions in cities that is ultimately driving that deforestation. So once we see that linkage, what we're bringing to this network of cities is, first of all, the data. And then we look at opportunities, how can you as a city start to reduce the destructive factor and increase the positive? So one of the programs we've developed that I'm really excited about is called the Partner Forest Program. And what that does is it takes an idea of a product or a service of some kind and links it to a forest community, region, or jurisdiction and tries to forge a relationship between the city and the consumption of the product so there's a mutually beneficial relationship. In Glasgow, we created a Partner Forest Coffee Truck. We had about 12 products that all had come from forests positive community sources: coffee, various chocolate items, hot cocoa, brownies, we had vanilla from Uganda. And we were showcasing them and saying, look these are amazing products that we can get right now, and by buying these products we can support not only conservation, but even reforestation in some cases. So that's just a little snapshot. We'll get to timber in a minute, because that's a big piece of this as well, but maybe I'll leave it there.

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Greg Lindsay 09:18

Before we get to timber, I'd love it if you could unpack this notion which has been promulgated in books like David Owens Green Metropolis and others that those of us who live in cities are more virtuous than those in suburbia, or even rural life, right? Like our carbon footprints are supposedly lower, but I'm a fan of like Neil Brenner, at the University of Chicago who argues that basically everything is an urban system. There's maybe 3% of the landmass of the planet

that is true wilderness and everything else serves that urban system. You seem to agree with that. I'm curious, how do we visualize it or how do we communicate that to city officials? That really the urban realm covers almost everything if we think about how it serves our lifestyles in these sort of urban footprints.

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Scott Francisco 09:58

I'd say that not only does the urban realm cover it conceptually, but in cities decisions of all sorts are being made that ultimately provide the goods and services to pretty much everyone in the world now. A little example would be in my visits to Latin America, one of the forest communities we've worked with called Uaxact'ón, who's the community that will hopefully be providing the timber for the Brooklyn Bridge Forest Project, if we get there. We asked them at one point, what was one of the biggest changes that's happened in the last 10 years to their community? And their answer was Chinese motorcycles. So the cost of a motorcycle in this remotest of remote villages in the world has plummeted by five fold, or a significant amount. Now, that's wonderful if you buy a motorcycle, but it means that there's 10 times as many motorcycles in this community than there was before. And what does that have to do with anything? Well, the reason that the inexpensive motorcycle is available, is that global supply chains, trade routes, and shipping, all of these things that are essentially managed through cities have allowed that flow. And so you can apply that to almost everything, whether it's food, even the ability for people to move around. All of that is happening because of innovations, "efficiencies in the market", etc. And unfortunately, that's also causing deforestation as we've industrialized our agricultural systems. You might be eating a pork burger in New York, but you're eating soy from the Amazon, and you didn't even know it, because the efficiency of moving that commodity around is so great.

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Greg Lindsay 11:49

Well before we get to timber, you mentioned working with Indigenous peoples. And I'm curious your thoughts on the role of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledge in these contexts. It was interesting to see that Lacaton & Vassal, the firm that won the most recent Pritzker Prize for architecture actually has a University of Indigenous knowledge they're setting up in Colombia, and I believe Ecuador has floated a similar idea as well. What practices have you learned from them or what are the ways that we can systematize Indigenous knowledge and promote it in terms of how we steward the forests?

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Scott Francisco 12:29

Wow, huge topic. Super important. And in fact, Indigenous engagement of all sorts was a major topic at COP. So it was wonderful to see that's really coming into the foreground for national governments and urban leaders. There's still a long way to go, of course, but the fact that we're talking about it is great. In our experience, what we're always trying to do is work with people on the ground, in and close to these forests, and engage them in the decision-making process. And we often use local and Indigenous, because Indigenous is a term that is quite specific. And you get different blends of Indigenous histories. In a place like Guatemala, you'll have descendants of the Maya who were there, and then you'll have communities which have a mix of that background. But it's about people that have an attachment to the land, have rights and

responsibilities that may need to be upheld, and need to be supported in their stewardship of the land. So it's learning, it's learning from what they need. The first question is, what do you need from us, from the world, from the outside to help you do what you think needs to be done here. And sometimes that's perhaps just give us more space. But other times, it's help provide economic opportunities so that we can afford to not cut down this forest to raise soybean or cattle. Right. That's a common problem in the tropics. You've got access to land and increasingly you need access to the global market. You need money that you may not have needed 20 or 40 years ago in the same quantity because perhaps you want to send your kids to school or perhaps you want to buy some things, and you should be able to do that. So then you're faced with this challenge of how do I take this land that I have customary rights to, and perhaps other forms of legal rights to, and turn that into something that's financially productive. We've brought global capitalism to the world, we've brought the markets to these people, we need to use those systems and also change those system so that forests can be maintained ultimately. Otherwise, that same system is going to ultimately do the conversion of all of these forests into short term economic gain with long term disaster.

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Greg Lindsay 15:30

Indeed. Well, that brings us back to the timber question and deforestation along those lines as well, in addition to soy farming in Brazil. How do we deal with both the timber issue and deforestation in the sense of is it the responsibility of cities? Are there mechanisms that go beyond carbon offsets? I'm curious of how you're thinking about how cities can aid in the preservation of that realm to prevent deforestation?

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Scott Francisco 15:56

I actually just came off a call with the city of Oslo in Norway, with their procurement and climate team. We're working with them to look at their consumption data for the municipal government. It's pretty difficult to say how much coffee the whole city consumes, although we're actually working on those numbers. We have something called a forest footprint dashboard. So for our participating cities, we've created a dashboard that looks at all of the commodities that are driving deforestation, including timber, coffee, beef, soy, etc. Allowing the city to see how many hectares of primary forest are being lost per year based on the consumption of their city. And we zeroed in with Oslo on the issue of coffee. So Norwegians are proud to be one of the highest coffee consumer, if not number one, they're number two.

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Greg Lindsay 16:56

As darkness and winter approach, Nordic countries coffee consumption will again go through the roof. So, yes.

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Scott Francisco 17:02

So the data we have allows us to take the quantity, in this case, the municipal government of Oslo. So this is not all the residents, this is just the government of Oslo that purchases 70,000 kilograms of coffee per year. Is that a lot, is that a little, 70,000 kilograms is not an insignificant

amount, but that's just what they're buying for the staff and city events. Now we can translate that into deforestation. And we can translate that into how many hectares per year of deforestation is embedded in that coffee. And then we can flip it around and say, if we switch to a coffee coming from a partner forest, which is doing forest conservation and restoration as part of its production strategy, we can basically take that number to zero, if that commitment is there. So that's an example of where the linkage can happen in a very concrete way between what a city is buying and its impact. But most importantly, is the leverage effect. In other words, it's not just that 70,000 kilograms of coffee, it's everyone else in the city seeing what the government is doing, and saying, that's pretty cool. Actually, I believe in those values and if the city can do it, I can do it. So what if the entire city of Oslo moved fairly rapidly towards a deforestation free coffee? And then you have the global leverage, which is, hey, the Norwegians are pretty cool, they're doing some advanced stuff. Let's look at what they're doing. So New York is now looking at Oslo and saying, Oslo has just moved to this deforestation free coffee - why are we not doing that? And this is where that network linkage really happens, both formally within cities for forests, but also informally amongst the mayor networks and the other networks of city leaders. So that's really important, in addition to the node factor of how they're actually directing those flows, a big part of that is just cultural influence and realizing that what happens in cities does not stay in the city. What happens in Vegas, does not stay in Vegas. It ripples across the world really quickly these days.

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Scott Francisco 19:17

So back to timber. I'll now take us to really one of the origin stories of Cities4Forests, which is the Brooklyn Bridge, New York. So Greg, you and I were living in New York at around the same time as each other and that's where we got to know each other. And part of my time in New York, I was living in Brooklyn and commuting over to the Wall Street area. I walked across the Brooklyn Bridge almost every day. It's an incredible landmark. I love it as an architect and designer. And I also love just the natural materials and one of those materials is wood. It's the beautiful wooden boardwalk and there's really no place like it in the city where you're up high in this environment. And there's only three materials: steel, stone, and wood. And one day I'm walking across looking at these planks and I'm thinking, this is so beautiful. And yet, this is tropical hardwood, I knew it was as a lover of wood. And I was immediately struck with this connection that we're consuming all of this wood for this landmark. I don't want it not to be wood. But I also don't want to be responsible as a user of this bridge to be cutting down Amazon forest. What would it take to flip that around and turn that consumption into an investment in forests, so that there was more and better forests as a result of this consumption. And that led me on this journey, which is where can those linkages happen. So in the case of timber, it can be a terrible thing for forests, but it can also be, amazingly enough, a positive thing for forests. In the case of tropical forests, you have communities out there that are doing incredibly robust forest management plans. Where they're taking a very selective number of trees per hectare on rotation every 30 or 40 years, they'll take two trees per hectare. And basically, they can fund their livelihoods and their whole conservation strategy through the sale of timber. And I call that conservation timber, a kind of new term that we've generated in our network, where by buying that timber you are effectively guaranteeing that this community can continue to support all the ecological values of that forest over time. Timber more broadly is a big topic today in cities because we're looking at building skyscrapers and mass timber. Building with wood is seen as a climate benefit. There's many questions around that, there's a lot of really important debate right now about wood in the city context being net positive for climate. Somewhat of a different topic, but it's something that we're very invested in. And we've actually created a guide for cities called sustainable wood for cities. So this zooms out

from the question of timber, to look at multiple sourcing strategies, like how you buy your wood is going to have a massive impact on that delta between really bad for the environment, and potentially quite good for the environment.

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Greg Lindsay 22:30

I'm gonna stop you there and ask you to take a step back, so you can tell our listeners a bit more about Brooklyn Bridge Park and your vision for it. As you mentioned, we knew each other in New York, so I know you've had that vision for a long time. And then, fate offered an opportunity in the form of the Van Alen Institute, a trust body in New York that basically does competitions, that's Van Alen's thing, to do these visioning exercises. And they put out one for rethinking the future of Brooklyn Bridge, which you entered. And if I recall correctly, you defeated Bjarke Ingles Group and the consortium he put together with some of the world's biggest architecture and engineering firms, and you won. And so can you tell us a bit more about the final pitches of this, how did you convince Van Alen and the judges that your vision was the right way to go for Brooklyn Bridge Park?

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Scott Francisco 23:14

Yeah, it was quite a sweet victory for sure. I'd been working by that time on the Brooklyn Bridge Forest Project for 11 years. So the fact that this competition was announced, to quote The Blues Brothers, we put the band back together. We'd been working as a small network of committed folks over the years and we said, let's do this, let's enter this competition. By that time, I've made multiple trips to this community in Guatemala, with our friends at Wildlife Conservation Society, who are also based in New York, built really a global network of like minded people that wanted to make that linkage between cities and forest conservation. So the competition was announced, they called it Reimagining Brooklyn Bridge. Van Alen and the city council was looking for just really creative ideas for the future of the bridge, knowing that there was some real problems. There was problems in particular with the promenade walkway. So for the listeners that are not familiar with it, the Brooklyn Bridge has an elevated promenade, that was part of Roebling's original design. It's really kind of the the crown of the bridge, it's a place for people to get up and look out. And it's one of the few bridges that has an elevated walkway, meaning you're looking up over the cars. So unlike say, Manhattan Bridge and others that have walkways, where you're stuck down in the truss, on the Brooklyn Bridge you're up high. So we took the Brooklyn Bridge forest idea, which was the idea of linking it to a community that was going to do forest positive wood production. The idea was that the planks would be essentially sponsored by individuals, so it was to be a zero cost solution for the city. And not only would it be zero cost, but the idea is that it would actually generate a kind of an endowment for local New York City conservation and forest activities, education, etc. But also fund that investment long term in the forest community abroad. So there's 11,000 planks, and we've counted them all on the bridge. If we could raise \$1,000 for each of those planks, then you've got your \$11 million endowment, and that would more than pay for the timber by a longshot. So a piece of it was creating public engagement with the project, transparency in terms of the sourcing, ensuring that this could be wood as part of its historic preservation for the landmark. But then we went a lot further, and took a look at what we could do for the neighborhoods around the bridge, to really make that story of forest conservation, biodiversity, and the benefits of forests very real. So we created a series of micro forests for the city, building on the work of groups like the parks department, but also the Natural Areas Conservancy, and others. We created the

coalition of existing New York City nature organizations and designed these spaces for education and enjoyment of these micro forests. We even created an idea of a club that was tucked in with the approach of the Brooklyn Bridge for young people to explore careers in engineering and ecology, which we believe are going to be increasingly in demand, we called it the understory. So we built these components, but then also looked at the circulation of the bridge, which is one of the main themes of the competition. How do you deal with the congestion on the Promenade? So anyone who's been over the bridge knows that it's divided into a pedestrian side and a bike side, which by the way, was not part of Roebling's original vision, there were no bicycles allowed on the bridge when it was first built. Gradually, the city made a decision over the years, probably in the 1970s, to create a bike lane on the Promenade. Great, in a way, but very problematic in terms of the tiny pinch points that you get with fast moving bicycles. So we proposed an elevated new bike lane at essentially the same level, but it had to deal with some structural issues. We kind of wove that through the bridge. So we got the bikes off of the main promenade, gave them their own bike lane. So the promenade was back to its original width. But we wanted the cyclists to share that experience. As a cyclist myself, I didn't want to simply be relegated to the traffic lanes below, which is one of the other suggestions. That we just shut down a lane of traffic, which by the way, has now happened since the competition. Suddenly, the bikes are now squished in with all the trucks and cars, and you're not really enjoying that experience. So we ended up doing both, we suggested closing two lanes of traffic on the lower deck, turning one into a bike lane and one into electric assist lane. And then additionally having a bike lane at the promenade level, which would be less for the commuter and more for the folks who want to experience the view and the beauty of the bridge. So putting that all together, the micro forests, the community partnership, essentially a very low cost to the city, like the wood component would all be self funded and some of the micro forest as well. And then we also engaged with people around the world. That competition was unique in that it was a 50/50 jury and global vote. By that time, we had pretty amazing networks around the world in some of these countries that were really looking for recognition and exposure for the conservation work they're doing. And that was a big part of it. We had those communities rise up and engage with the voting process.

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Greg Lindsay 29:22

I just love that you mobilized the people of the world to win against Bjarke. Truly a victory of the underdog against architecture in general. So what's your path to implementation with that project? Is there a budget? Is there a timeline for that? Is the city engaging with you and how likely is it to become fully realized?

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Scott Francisco 29:45

Well, great question. And now that we have a new Mayor elect, Eric Adams, this is very relevant to us because Eric Adams' office was one of the few New York officials who really got on board with this vision. First of all, he made some personal decisions to become a vegan, which was in part really motivated by the environmental impacts of eating meat, and particularly beef. We know that beef is one of the worst commodities for deforestation. Not only that, but he actually wrote support and participated in policymaking at the state level to support deforestation free regulations. And so he had put his name behind a number of political actions to reduce imported deforestation, so he was already on this wavelength. So we went to his office and they expressed interest, actually Eric Adams signed our Declaration for forests and climate that

we presented formally at COP, also at New York climate week a month or so ago. And he put his name behind it. So the borough of Brooklyn was a signatory under Eric Adams for the city's commitment to end deforestation. So we've got a great beginning of a relationship with him. The fact that he's now going to be the mayor of New York is fantastic for us. And so we have real hope that under his administration we'll see some movement. We started the project under Bloomberg. Under the de Blasio administration, we made zero progress with the city, however lots of progress with our other partners. But now we've got someone in office who wants to go back to big bold ideas again. And this would be a statement to the world that New York City really means what it says about pending deforestation and partnering with communities that are part of that story.

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Greg Lindsay 32:02

Given Mayor Adams commitment to crypto, you might want to think about tokenizing those planks. I jokingly put this out there again, but anything is possible. He's a man of many, many interests, Eric Adams. We're almost out of time, Scott. We've talked about New York, we've talked about Indigenous peoples of Guatemala, are there any other cities or forests quickly in passing that you think are worth mentioning to our listeners in terms of really progressive or notable facts in the network that are doing amazing work? If you'd like to give any particular shout outs to other network members before we call it a day?

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Scott Francisco 32:37

We're really excited about Paris joining our network. They finally signed on to both the Declaration and the membership just a few weeks before COP. And Paris is really motivated on the tropical forest issue with respect to Africa. In fact, Mayor Hidalgo hosted a symposium on the forests of Central Africa, just a few weeks before COP. So this is kind of unprecedented for a city to take on a global issue like this. And it's exactly what we're trying to incentivize and promote cities to do. So they hosted a fantastic symposium. Some of our partners with Cities4Forests were part of the speaker groups. So we're really thrilled that they're on board. And of course, Anne Hidalgo is a world leader and part of the C40 network leadership historically. They've got the Olympics coming up, and we're working with them to look at the tropical timber question with respect to the infrastructure at the Olympics. They've committed to 50% of the infrastructure being timber. And, the African countries are saying, let us have a share of this. Let us show you what we can do with conservation, and provide timber that comes with a conservation story. Let's showcase it at the Paris Olympics. So that's one big one. London just signed on, we're doing work in Glasgow. Glasgow is fantastic. The city leadership in Glasgow really came out and rallied behind the work. We created a wooden boardwalk in Glasgow called the Partner Force Boardwalk. It was an exhibition, but it's going to be relocated permanently in the city of Glasgow. So I can't say enough about their enthusiasm. And in many cases, it's cities matching up their commitments to to be climate neutral by say 2030 or 2050, depending on how ambitious they are. They know that they can't get to climate neutrality without looking beyond your borders. It's virtually impossible as a city when you've got materials coming in. They're going to have a climate impact no matter how efficient you are. So you have to look at investments outside your borders. And we really see this idea of investing in forests and conservation as one of the key strategies for effectively mitigating climate change.



Greg Lindsay 35:05

Great. Well, thank you so much for joining us, Scott. It's been fantastic to have you on. Great to connected. I can't wait to see some of your work here in Montreal, we need to catch up again soon.



Scott Francisco 35:15

And please follow us on Instagram, we have a fairly new Instagram account called @partnerforestprogram. There's the Cities4Forests.com main website, and a partnerforests.org website just for the Partner Forests Program. We'd love to hear from any of the viewers and listeners out there, if you'd like to get involved. Just reach out and we'll definitely get back to you.



Greg Lindsay 35:41

Great, thank you so much, Scott. As always, thank you for joining us for this episode of threesixtyCITY. We'll be back next week with another episode, until then take care.