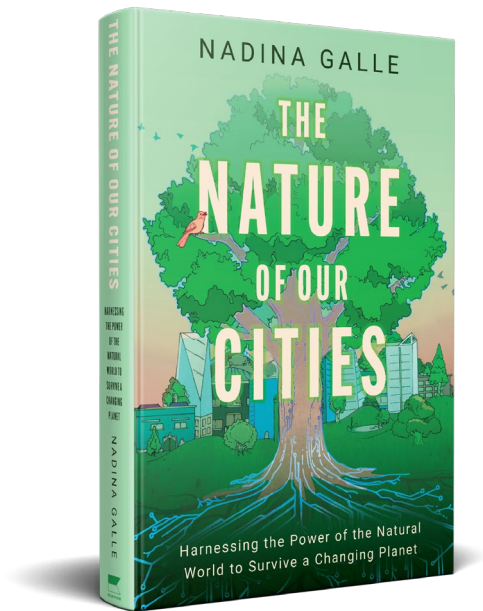# READING GROUP GUIDE

THE NATURE OF OUR CITIES:
Harnessing the Power of the Natural World to Survive a Changing Planet
by Nadina Galle

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In the tradition of Elizabeth Kolbert and Michael Pollan, *The Nature of Our Cities* is a stirring exploration of how innovators from around the world are combining urban nature with emerging technologies, protecting the planet's cities from the effects of climate change and safeguarding the health of their inhabitants.

A fellow at MIT's Senseable City Lab and selected for the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list, Galle is at the forefront of the growing movement to fuse nature and technology for urban resilience. In *The Nature of Our Cities*, she embarks on a journey as fascinating as it is pressing, showing how scientists and citizens from around the world are harnessing emerging technologies to unlock the power of the natural world to save their cities, a phenomenon she calls the "Internet of Nature." Traveling the globe, Galle examines how urban nature, long an afterthought for many, actually points the way toward a more sustainable future. She reveals how technology can help nature navigate this precarious moment with modern advances such as:

- Laser-mapping that identifies at-risk neighborhoods to fight deadly health disparities
- AI-powered robots that prevent wildfires from reaching urban areas
- Intelligent water gardens that protect cities from floods and hurricanes
- Advanced sensors that achieve 99% tree survival in dry, hot summers

Optimistic in spirit yet pragmatic in approach, Galle writes persuasively that the future of urban life depends on balancing the natural world with the technology that can help sustain it.

See more at nadinagalle.com.

Questions for Discussion for *The Nature of Our Cities*

1. How has *The Nature of Our Cities* changed your view on the nature–technology relationship? Can you provide examples from the book or from your own experiences that illustrate how technology can enhance or detract from our connection to nature? Additionally, how might our understanding of this relationship shape our approach to environmental conservation and urban planning?

2. How does *The Nature of Our Cities* use its prologue and epilogue, which respectively depict a city devoid of nature and one abundant with it, to shape the book's narrative? Do these sections effectively convey the transformation from a city without nature to one abundant with it?

3. In Chapter 1, "Unsilenced Spring," Tjeu Franssen's use of sensor technology for tree care tasks is highlighted. What potential risks or challenges do you see associated with the digitization of arboriculture? How might the reliance on technology impact traditional practices and the overall health of urban green spaces?

4. Why do you think the author titled Chapter 1 "Unsilenced Spring"— a tongue-in-cheek reference to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*? Consider the themes and messages conveyed in the chapter, particularly focusing on the final paragraph for additional insight.

5. Considering the frustration felt by Internet of Nature innovators like Fiona Watt (Chapter 2), Vivek Shandas (Chapter 3), and Scott Altenhoff (Chapter 8) in persuading cities to invest in greenery and address environmental issues, what strategies could have enhanced their ability to communicate the importance of their findings and overcome resistance to change?

6. Reflect on the author's emphasis on Internet of Nature innovators. What lessons have you gleaned from their perspectives and actions throughout the book? Can you provide

specific examples of how these lessons could be applied in urban environments or conservation efforts?

7. Do you believe the book's portrayal of a city devoid of nature and the potential consequences of this absence could fuel climate alarmism? How might an overemphasis on alarmist narratives impact readers' perceptions and engagement with the book?

8. In Chapter 4, we learn of tools like Watch Duty, an app providing real-time wildfire updates. Given access to tools like Watch Duty, would you rebuild and stay in a wildfire-affected area, or relocate? What factors, such as safety, attachment to the area, community support, and environmental concerns, would influence your decision?

9. Considering your own neighborhood, what natural disasters pose a threat, and how could Internet of Nature technologies bolster community resilience? How might widespread adoption of these technologies impact broader societal resilience and disaster preparedness?

10. Chapter 5 highlights the vulnerability of combined sewer systems (CSS) to flooding during heavy rainfall events. Why are CSSs particularly prone to flooding, and what dangers do combined sewage overflows (CSOs) pose to urban environments and public health? Additionally, what innovative solutions or technologies exist to mitigate the impact of CSSs and better manage stormwater in urban areas?

11. In Chapter 6, "The Scientists Within Us," citizen science–based biodiversity data collection is explored. How might this technology shape urban development and conservation practices? Can you provide examples of how citizen science initiatives have influenced decision-making in urban areas? What challenges could arise in implementing and utilizing citizen science data?

12. In Chapter 6, the author cultivates a new appreciation for "nature hiding in plain sight" as she notices "a weed, an overgrown gutter, a tuft of vegetation next to a drainpipe, all vibrant intersections of life forms teeming with far more than meets the eye." Do you perceive urban biodiversity as inferior to its idealized rural equivalents? Provide an example of "nature hiding in plain sight" from your own neighborhood.

13. Chapter 7 introduces initiatives like Email-A-Tree and Text-A-Tree, encouraging individuals to share how local trees have helped them during challenging times. Can you recall a time when a specific tree or natural setting supported you through difficulties? How do these connections to nature affect our well-being and resilience in times of adversity?

14. What are the overlooked psychological impacts of natural disasters, such as anxiety? How might these effects vary among different populations like children, the elderly, or

those with preexisting mental health conditions? What strategies could address these impacts in affected communities?

15. In Chapters 7 and 8, NatureDose, an app tracking users' time in nature, is introduced. How much time do you spend on outdoor activities weekly, considering the average NatureDose user spends less than two hours in nature per week? What strategies could you use to increase this time?

16. How does tracking or gamifying time spent in nature impact one's relationship with the environment? Can you share personal experiences or observations on how technology has influenced your connection to nature?

17. In Chapter 9, Rich Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, challenges the notion that his work is "anti-technology," attributing children's declining outdoor exploration to shifting social conditions, particularly evident in urban areas. Reflecting on your own childhood experiences or your current role as a parent, identify some of these social conditions and discuss their impact on childhood experiences.

18. Focusing on Chapter 9, explore the role of nature education apps while reducing screen time during childhood. How do these apps balance technology usage with encouraging outdoor exploration and fostering a connection with nature? Can you provide examples of apps that effectively strike this balance? Additionally, what challenges might emerge in using technology for nature education, and how can they be tackled?

19. How does the author's personal disclosure of her pregnancy at the end of Chapter 8 enhance the significance of the topic in Chapter 9, which explores children's relationship with nature in the digital age? Additionally, how does the author effectively integrate personal experiences with academic discourse throughout the book?

20. Reflecting on the book's exploration of nature within urban settings, how has it influenced your perception of nature in cities? Can you recall specific examples or experiences from the book that have resonated with you and contributed to your changed perspective? How do you now envision urban nature's sights, sounds, and scents, and what aspects do you find most compelling?