



Leave No Child *Inside*

*To create a better future
for our children,
let's help them connect
with their wild roots*

BY MARILYN WYZGA

It is the mid-1950s, Trenton, New Jersey. Out of the blue – and inspired by stories from my father’s work buddies – my parents decide to try camping. Mom and Dad pack up the station wagon with their three young kids, flannel sleeping bags and some Dinty Moore beef stew, and drive off to the Poconos under grey skies. By the time they arrive at Promised Land Campground, their visions of sleeping beneath the pines are awash in a downpour. Dad warms stew on a fire beneath the picnic table. They sleep in the car. Morning dawns, the sun comes out and, as dad recalls, “We had a beautiful weekend out of it.” Thoroughly hooked, they invest in a canvas tent that will house them and, as the family grew, all 7 of us kids. They take up backpacking, buy a second-hand canoe and for the next 40-some years of summer and fall vacations, tour around New England and other parts of the country, camping out.

My parents didn’t bring us along to teach us about nature. We were just a family having fun outside. Today I make my living as a wildlife educator in New Hampshire – a career I attribute to those early outdoor experiences – and all of my siblings enjoy their own unique connection to the outdoors. I consider us fortunate.

Sadly, opportunities like these are less and less available to today’s youth. Children are not getting outside – not fishing, or building forts, or looking under logs for salamanders. A national conversation about this phenomenon has been ignited by outdoorsman Richard Louv’s groundbreaking book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. In it, Louv traces the causes and impacts of this separation through interviews with educators, parents and health professionals, as well as with children themselves. He outlines the environmental, social, psychological and spiritual implications of what he calls “nature-deficit disorder.” And he describes a growing body of research that reveals the necessity of contact with nature for healthy child development — and for adults, neighborhoods, whole communities and the very future of our society.

New research strongly suggests that childhood experience in nature is a vital element, perhaps a necessity for healthy child development. Outdoor play develops full use of the senses, helps protect psychological well-being, improves attention-deficit disorder and reduces stress.

Yet as of 1990, the radius around the home where children were allowed to roam on their own had shrunk to one-ninth of what it had been in 1970. Why is this happening? Limited access to nature, fear of strangers, popularity of video games, TV and computers, perceived safety risks and fear of lawsuits – the list is lengthy. Well-meaning but frightened parents, school systems and media are keeping kids out of the fields and the woods. By moving childhood indoors, we are depriving children of a full connection to the world. The implications – both for children’s physical and mental health and for the future of our natural resources and traditional pastimes such as hunting and fishing – are far-reaching. Consequently, one of the most important gifts we can give a child is his or her own enthusiasm for the outdoors.

Outdoor Classrooms

In the past few decades, the way children understand and experience nature has changed dramatically. A child today can tell you about the whales in the ocean, dinosaurs of the past, or

trees in the rain forest, but not about what lives and grows in his or her backyard. While today’s kids are aware of the global threats to the environment, their own physical contact with nature is fading.

What can we do to help reconnect children with the outdoors? For one thing, say experts, revive recess. Roughly 40% of school districts have either eliminated recess or are considering cutting it. Some schools that still offer recess have “dumbed down” the playground by, for instance, banning running games. Without these activities that increase heart rates and improve hand-eye coordination, it’s easy to see why 17% of children are overweight.

Schools that soften the schoolyard or limit children’s engagement with the outdoors often have concerns about liability. We can accommodate that concern by creating safe

zones for nature exploration. We can also weave nature experiences into our classrooms and create or expand programs to introduce youth to the outdoors.

David Sobel of Antioch New England University says schools are unintentionally spreading fear of the natural world and ecological problems. Children are savvy to current environmental issues like global warming, Sobel notes. But lacking direct experience with the outdoors, they begin to associate nature with fear and disaster, rather than discovery, joy and wonder.

A complete environmental curriculum, by contrast, engages children directly in nature while using traditional methods and current technologies to teach subject matter in the classroom. Some schools cut recess so children will have more time to study for tests. Louv argues that nature “does not steal time, it amplifies it.” Getting acquainted with nature inspires creativity and, studies show, actually improves test scores. Students who

GET OUT!

Even if you can’t go with them, encourage the children in your life to get outside. These simple activities can help you get started — and improve the quality of life for *everyone* in the family!

- Go for walks together, even for just a half hour. Go in different seasons and see how things change.
- Get down on hands and knees and look under rocks, logs and leaves.
- Put up a bird feeder, get a bird book and start identifying the birds that come to eat. Keep a seasonal list.
- Pick a time of day for weather observations – take a temperature reading, look at the sky, or note when it gets light in the morning and dark in the evening.
- Go to a local nature center, walk their trails and ask about books on nature crafts or outdoor explorations.
- Go outside on a starry night and look up at the sky.
- Have fun helping your children build a fort or shelter in your yard or nearby woodlot.
- Set up a tent and camp in your backyard. Enroll your child in Barry Conservation Camp (starts in July; see page 20).
- Find a local farm where you can pick berries, apples or whatever’s in season.
- Plan summer activities together. Have kids pack their own pack.
- Take your child hunting, fishing or wildlife watching.

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have classes outdoors improve their grade-point averages, as well as their skills in critical thinking and decision-making, and tend to be more cooperative, more engaged in the classroom and more open to conflict resolution.

Taking It to the Streets

New Hampshire may be largely rural, but the problem of nature-deficit disorder is not limited to urban areas, as naturalist Ruth Smith found when she ran an after-school program in rural Hopkinton. “Even kids who said they liked being outdoors had little personal experience and lacked basic skills like how to navigate a trail,” she noted. Once out and about, Smith observed that the thing the kids most enjoyed was outdoor play in nature – building forts, dams and tree houses.

Even in urban and suburban areas, nature is closer than you might think. Louv recommends taking advantage of “nearby nature” – the ravine behind your house, or the little woods at the end of the cul-de-sac. Adults expect nature to be so much bigger, but to a child, that ravine is a universe. Protecting those little spaces in cities and suburbs is a step in the right direction.

Still, the No. 1 reason parents give for limiting their children’s play outdoors is fear of “stranger danger.” At a talk by David Sobel in Hancock, a local parent observed, “playing in the backyard is not safe,” even in their small, rural town. Ironically, the statistics on abductions suggest almost all are by family members, and the number of abductions has been going down for about a decade; kids are safer outside the home than at any time since the 1970s.

We think of the outdoors as being inherently risky, but indoor dwelling comes with its own risks for children. Pediatricians say they’re not treating very many broken

Friends in low places: Finding earthworms and other critters among the moss and leaf litter inspires a connection with the outdoors.



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Outdoor Bookshelf

Here are a few of our favorite books on children in the outdoors:

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder, Richard Louv

Father Nature: Fathers as Guides to the Natural World, ed. Paul S. Piper and Stan Tag

A Sense of Wonder, Rachel Carson

Children’s Special Places, David Sobel

Check your local library or bookstore for many great children’s books about outdoor adventure.

On the web:

The Children and Nature Network - www.cnaturenet.org

Explore Wild New England - www.wildnewengland.org

bones anymore. Rather, they are seeing repetitive-stress injuries, childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder and the effects of indoor air pollution. Other disturbing risks associated with the online neighborhood are emerging as kids socialize in a virtual world instead of playing outside. We seem to have traded the perceived dangers lurking in nature for the potentially more threatening and permanent impacts of sitting in front of the television or computer.

We Need Nature

Biologically, humans are still hunters and gatherers. The evolutionary remnants of these past experiences are hard-wired into our nervous system, says zoologist Gordon Orians. Renowned naturalist E.O. Wilson takes it a step further, saying that humans have an innate affinity for the natural world, a biologically based need essential to our development as individuals. Both scientists’ work suggests a genuine physical need for nature, one that, in modern humans of all ages, is simply no longer fulfilled.

Studies have also shown that many people who care deeply about the future of the environment enjoyed transcendent experiences in nature when they were children. A particularly interesting study comes from Dr. Jim Pease of Iowa State University. Pease surveyed over 300 farmers in 20 states who have taken advantage of wetlands restoration programs on their land. He wanted to find out what motivates private landowners – especially farmers who depend on the productivity of their land to produce marketable crops – to enroll their land in a program that obligates them to take it permanently out of production. He found that wildlife plays an extremely important role in at

tracting landowners to restore wetlands. In fact, the top four reasons named have to do with wildlife, future generations or natural beauty. Even more interesting, Pease found those farmers shared common childhood experiences: fishing, hunting, having a “wild place,” and reading books and stories about the outdoors were favorite youthful activities of more than 71% of these landowners.

Think back to your childhood. If you’re over thirty, you likely spent time in the outdoors uninhibited – playing, making forts, climbing trees, going fishing, getting dirty. What would our lives have been like without those times?


Reviving a Sense of Wonder

As parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers and role models, we can spend more time in nature with children. The bonus is, when we give children the gift of nature, we gain all the same benefits they do – the stress reduction, the longer attention span, the renewed sense of wonder. We need to be passionate about re-con-

necting kids with nature.

Passion, Louv writes, is “the long-distance fuel for the struggle to save what is left of our natural heritage...”

Passion does not arrive on videotape or on a CD... it is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart. If we are going to save the environment, we must also save an endangered key-stone species: the child in nature.

Louv’s encouragement to grownups is simple and easily achieved: *Take the kids outside.* 

Children have a natural curiosity about snakes and slippery things.



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Fishing – A Great Way to Connect Kids with Nature

Just like it was yesterday, I remember mornings on the river, fishing with Dad: We chug slowly out onto the fog-shrouded river, he cuts the motor and we glide to a halt. A jay’s call breaks the still air, and Dad clatters a bit as he puts the rods together. We hook fat minnows on the lines, and I cast mine into the mist with a satisfying “plunk.” I enjoy the slow drift of the boat, the cool morning air and sensing the underwater world through the line in my fingertips, waiting for a sunfish or crappie to bite.

Later in the day, we eat our sandwiches. Dad’s still focused on fishing, but I’m starting to doze, lulled by the sun and the easy rock of the boat. He revs up the engine and heads for the shoreline, pointing out how the river has carved into the cliffs. We spot

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turtles sunning on a log and a stream feeding into the river. At its mouth, downed trees make a perfect place to cast for bass. Upstream, a heron pauses and inspects us before continuing its own search for dinner.

We head back to the landing with a full fish box. Dad counts on me to scamper ashore and pull the boat in. I watch to make sure the boat sets right on the trailer, which it hardly ever does. Then the ride home, sunburned, mud-splattered and smelling like fish. But Mom is always glad to see us.

Only later in life would I realize how lucky I was to spend the time fishing with Dad, and how relaxing those hours were for him after a busy week at work. As soon as we could walk, he had us fishing from the shoreline with long bamboo rods. We didn’t need scientific studies to know that getting outside was good for the soul. I was just a lucky girl with a dad who brought me along, who patiently untangled knots in the fishing line and helped me see and love the natural world.

Those fun times taught me a lot about nature, but maybe even more about self-confidence, trust and finding a balance for work and play in life. New Hampshire has a wealth of places where families can fish, and kids don’t need a license, so do your part to fight “nature-deficit disorder” — take a kid fishing! It’s a great way to explore the natural world and introduce young people to an outdoor activity they can enjoy all their lives. — *Jane Vachon*