

Children & NATURE



Photo: Paige Falk

The Importance of Outdoor Play to the Future of Conservation

IF YOU'RE READING THIS ARTICLE, CHANCES ARE THAT YOU'RE AN ADULT WITH A SUCCESSFUL CAREER, THAT YOU LOVE THE OUTDOORS — HIKING, BIKING, FISHING, CAMPING — AND THAT YOU GET OUT ALMOST EVERY WEEKEND, WARM SUMMER EVENING, OR WHENEVER THE OPPORTUNITY ARISES.

It is also likely that you fell in love with nature, the woods, the hills, streams, and rivers — everything outdoors — as a child. You probably played outside during the summer from dawn to dusk every day, or you may have gone to summer camp, where you hiked, and backpacked, and played outdoors for weeks on end.

Our children's relationship to the outdoors is very different today. Increasingly they are losing their connection to nature, spending more time indoors and online, rather than offline and outside. In addition, many parents are afraid of letting their children explore the outdoors; afraid to let them wander off, unsupervised and on their own. This is a fear that gets passed along to their youngsters.

It's a disconnect that is proving to be bad for our children, and ultimately could be bad for all of us. What will happen to land conservation efforts if future generations don't know what it's like to see an animal in the wild, or feel the thrill of discovery during a hike through woods, or know the joy of exploring a cool, clear stream? Will they fight to save that which they have never experienced firsthand?

What Keeps Kids Away from Nature?

Numerous recent studies* indicate that children and teens are turning away from outdoors activities at an alarming rate. This trend coincides with a steady decline over the last several generations of the number of natural areas where children can play. As a result, many children are deprived of easily accessible fields, streams, and other open spaces — an outdoor world that was readily available to their parents and grandparents when they were young.

Why aren't more children out enjoying nature? Their answers may surprise you. The number one reason

* All data cited is from 2008.

cited by children and teens for not getting outdoors — including nearly a quarter of children ages 6-12 — is a lack of time. And over twenty percent of 6-12 year-olds cited too much school work as their top reason for not getting outdoors.

These are disturbing figures, representing almost half of all first-through seventh-graders, who either do not have, or feel that they do not have, enough time to put aside their cares — or their gadgets — and go outside and play. Perhaps more disturbing is that a full thirty-nine percent of 6-12 year-olds and fifty-four percent of 13-17 year-olds cite a lack of interest as the top reason for not getting out into nature. Perhaps it is no coincidence that today less than half of Americans aged six and up participates in outdoor recreation on a regular basis.

But do children really lack the time to play outdoors when the average child spends up to five hours a day in front of a TV, computer, or other electronic screen? In just a few generations America has made a dramatic shift from a primarily rural, agricultural country to a predominately urban and suburban nation. This transformation has changed our relationship with the land, and as a result, the priorities of our children have changed as well. Most kids simply don't grow up with nature right outside their door anymore. And with electronic diversions readily available to them, there has been a direct impact on the recreational choices that children make.

Why Lack of Outdoor Play Matters

The decrease in outdoor play has many ramifications, including

impacts on childhood physical and mental health. Childhood obesity has increased dramatically since the 1960s and now affects twenty-five percent of all school-aged children. The number of children with vitamin D deficiencies has increased dramatically too, with some seventy percent of children suffering from some type of vitamin D deficiency. (Vitamin D is primarily absorbed through exposure to sunlight.) And today's youth spend an average of only thirty minutes a week, just over 4 minutes a day on average, in unstructured play. The kind of play that psychologists tell us that



Photo: Cristian Raifura

youngsters need in order to develop executive thinking — the ability to control emotions and behavior.

Adequate access to the outdoors can affect stress levels as well. Studies have shown that living near (or even driving by) parks and other green spaces, reduces stress. And a 2001 study in the Netherlands showed that people living near green spaces reported fewer mental and physical complaints than their more urban neighbors.

In his ground-breaking book, *Last Child in the Woods*, author Richard

Louv describes the indoors and on-screen world most children live in as filled with infinite data that is instantly accessible, but which leaves children (and adults) over-saturated with information. In a world where “that which cannot be Googled doesn't count,” what gets lost is the knowledge of what things in nature feel like, smell like, or even look like. Louv argues that even though children have virtually unlimited access to facts and data, they can only gain wisdom and retain a sense of wonder about life by developing their senses in the outdoors.

While a direct correlation cannot be proven between any of these problems and the decrease in outdoor activity, we do know that children and adults who include ample outdoor activity in their lives tend to engage in more activities across the board and have fewer health complaints. Children who spend time outdoors have been shown to exercise, study outside of class, and work more than their counterparts who stay indoors — in effect, leading fuller lives.

The Impact on Conservation

There are many reasons to increase children's participation in outdoor activities. It's not only important to their physical and mental health, but in the long run, it may also ensure the future of conservation itself. Two areas may be impacted in particular: public support for land protection, and conservation leadership.

IMPACT ON LAND PROTECTION:

It costs money to protect the land. Over the last several decades, Americans have stepped up to foot the bill, overwhelmingly passing local

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conservation measures (essentially a self-imposed tax) to ensure that natural places are protected. In late 2008, at the start of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, more than 70% of conservation ballot initiatives passed. In 2010, more than 81% passed. Will future voters who have not developed a connection to or an affinity for the natural world be willing to pay to protect it? The answer could have a big impact on the future of our nation's land and water resources and working farms and ranches.

IMPACT ON CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP:

Throughout the 20th century conservation movement leaders and fish and wildlife managers typically came from rural backgrounds, or were raised with hunting and fishing as an integral part of their lives. The experiences they gained through outdoor activity influenced the way they carried out their work, and their understanding of the outdoors shaped their conservation and natural resource management decisions. With far fewer young people growing up on the land, how will conservation leadership be impacted? Will students even be drawn to wildlife conservation as a career option? And if they are, how will their lack of practical experience on the land affect how our natural resources are managed?

What You Can Do

How can we ensure children develop and retain a connection to the land? How can we make the outdoors a bigger part of their lives? The answer depends primarily on parents. Parental lifestyle is the main determining factor for how children live, particularly younger children. Fully three-quarters of preteen children and sixty-four percent of teenagers identified their parents as the most influential factor in their deciding to take part in outdoor



Photo: Emir Memedovski

activities. Other adult family members can have a big influence as well, helping kids discover the joy, adventure, and just plain fun of outdoor play. In fact, in surveys, kids aged 6-12 cite “fun” as their main reason for going outdoors, listing bicycling, fishing, camping, running, and hiking as their most popular outdoor pursuits.

These are easily accessible activities for most adults, even though busy schedules and the ever-increasing demands of work may make it a challenge to pursue them. In many families both parents have jobs, which can further complicate finding the time and energy to plan a hike, camping trip, or other activity.

But the rewards for making the time to venture out into nature are great. Parents and other adult family

members who take their children outdoors on a regular basis have the opportunity to share their kids' sense of wonder for the world as they hike new trails or learn about new plants and animals. Many say their children seem more at peace with themselves and the world when they are outside, away from the noise and congestion of the city. And grown-ups themselves benefit too by tapping into that same sense of wonder and getting some fresh air and exercise along the way.

Whether you're an avid outdoor recreation enthusiast or just keep meaning to get outside more, take the time to explore the natural world with a child. It's an investment in them, in you, and ultimately, in the future of conservation. ■

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