

A group of five children and one adult woman are gathered around a large green plant in a garden. The children are looking at the plant with interest. One boy is holding a magnifying glass. The woman is pointing at the plant, possibly explaining something to the children. The background shows a grassy area and some trees.

PEOPLE

NURTURE & NATURE

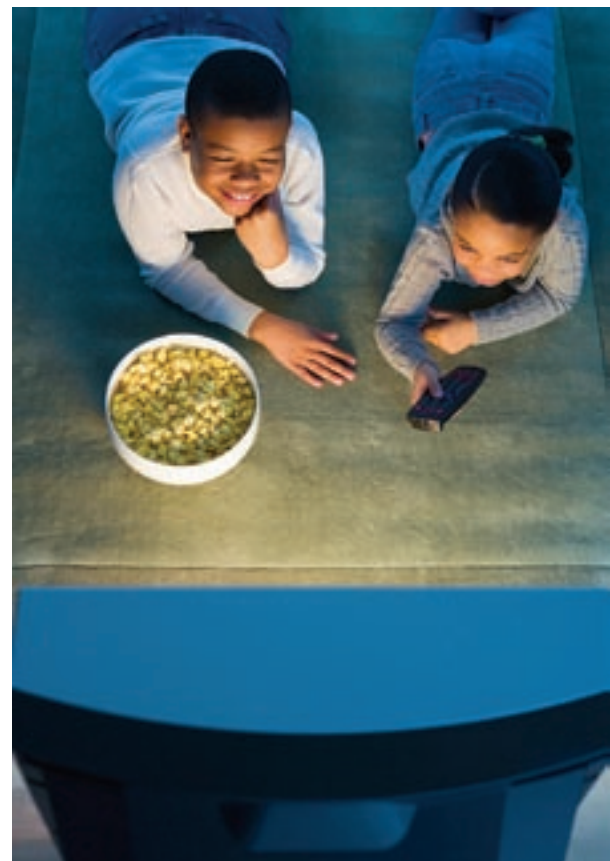
AS A SOCIETY, ARE WE BECOMING DISCONNECTED FROM NATURE?
WILL OUR CHILDREN GROW UP TO PROTECT WILDERNESS?

by Katherine Millett

In this special report, Chicago WILDERNESS examines how we and our children connect with nature—and how those behavioral patterns may affect the future.



▶▶ NATURE HAS BECOME OLD-FASHIONED. THE FUTURE LOOMS ELECTRONIC. KIDS COME HOME FROM SCHOOL WEARING EARPHONES, SLUMP DOWN IN FRONT OF COMPUTERS OR TELEVISIONS.



“WHAT DO YOU WANNA DO?”

“I dunno. What do you wanna do?”

“I dunno.”

“Let’s go to the prairie.”

If you had that conversation, you must be over age 35. You ran with your friend to the neighborhood vacant lot, a green and untamed patch of weeds and trees surrounded by city (called a “prairie” in Chicago). Rain had fallen during the school day, making puddles and streams in the gravel. You threw sticks in the water and pelted them with stones, hauled old boards and branches together to make a fort, hunkered down and spied on other kids. When that got boring you started a game of kick-the-can and let the little kids join only if they begged. You ran and yelled, made rules and broke them, messed up your clothes and skinned your knees. When it got dark, or you got hungry, you went home for dinner.

Childhood has changed. Today, kids come home from school wearing earphones, slump down in front of computers or televisions, and hang out with their friends by cell phone and e-mail. Alone in their separate rooms, they navigate a predetermined world. Invisible adults manage their curiosity. When it gets dark they don’t notice, and when they get hungry they open bags of snacks.

And this, my friends, is a problem—for children and for wild nature. If children are losing their connection with nature—and copious research shows that they are—who will care enough about wildlife and open spaces to advocate for them 10 or 20 years from now? If children don’t have direct, intimate experiences with nature, why will they care if it goes away? They need good times in the outdoors to realize how wonderful it all is, to appreciate bees that live in the ground and caterpillars that drop from tree branches. No wonder the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has recognized play as a right of every child.

Few American cities can equal Chicago’s commitment to planting, beautifying, and greening its urban landscapes, but its metropolitan area is seriously threatened by care-less development and sprawl. If we don’t get out and enjoy our parks and forest preserves, and introduce them to our children, we may lose them. That’s what is happening to the very first Boy Scout camp in the United States, owned by the Chicago Area Council of Boy Scouts since 1911. Last year, the council agreed to sell its Owasippe Scout Reservation, nearly 5,000 acres of wild and

pristine habitat for 19 rare species near Muskegon, Michigan, to a developer.

Kids need to muck about in nature.

This may seem obvious, but people are getting Ph.D.s by proving that time in natural places counters an array of physical, mental, and emotional disorders. The sedentary, electrified life has been linked to 4 million cases of attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder (ADHD) nationwide and an alarming increase in rates of childhood obesity and diabetes. The social costs of “nature-deficit disorder” are high and rising. Obesity puts a huge strain on the Illinois economy, accounting for \$3.4 billion a year in health costs, according to a state-by-state report published in 2004 in the journal *Obesity Research*.

Teachers may be surprised to discover what their students think about the world outdoors. Pam Koenig, a third-grade teacher and an avid hiker, showed her students a picture of herself standing on a sunny mountain trail. “They thought it was very odd that I would choose to be there,” she says. “They couldn’t imagine being outdoors like that, let alone in the mountains. On a cold day, when a voice comes over the intercom to say there will be no outdoor recess, the kids cheer,” Koenig adds. “I just don’t understand it. They come to school in a bus, sit in a classroom, go home in a bus, and spend the rest of the day inside. You’d think they would want to be outside, away from adult control for a while.”

BY THE NUMBERS: THE E-GENERATION

1960s television offered **27** hours of children’s programming a week, much of it shown on Saturday morning. Today, there are **14** television networks aimed at children. They do not include the show most popular with children, *American Idol*.

Childhood’s outdoor pastimes are declining fast, and the rate has accelerated in the past decade, especially in the last **5** years, according to the National Sporting Goods Association annual survey of physical activity.

4% of kids were obese in the 1960s. Today, **16%** are overweight (a child who weighs more than 85 out of 100 kids of the same age, height, and sex), according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

A child is **6** times more likely to play a video game on a typical day than to ride a bike, according to surveys by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the CDC.

Kaiser Family Foundation found in 2003 that **66%** of children under 2 were watching TV an hour a day plus spending almost another hour on computer or video games.

Almost **50%** of 4- to 6-year-olds have TVs in their bedrooms. And after age 8, “screen time”—TV plus computers and other electronic media—soared to **6.5** hours a day, on average.

During the school year, children ages 8 to 10 spend an average of **6** hours a day watching television, playing video games and using computers, according to the Kaiser study. TV ratings show kids watch more over the summer.

Since 1995, the portion of children ages 7 to 11 who swim, fish, or play touch football has declined by about **33%**. Bike riding is down **31%** since 1995.

In 1995, **68%** of children ages 7 to 11 rode a bike at least six times a year. In 2004, only **47%** did.

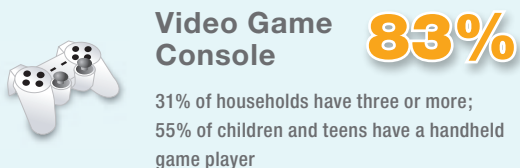
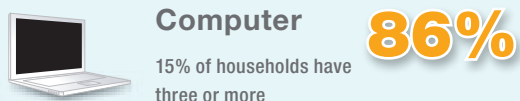
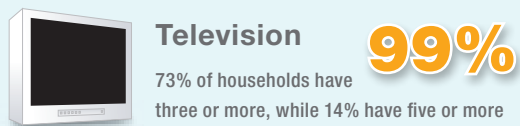
The sales of children’s bikes fell **21%** from 2000 to 2004.

Sources: msnbc.msn.com/id/12806594/ and usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-07-11-pastimes-childhood_x.htm



DEVICE DEPENDENCE

The lure of entertainment from electronic devices can keep children indoors. Percentages of American households that are hooked up:



Sources: Kaiser Family Foundation, March 2005; Yankee Group



Our sedentary lives

More than 60% of children between the ages of 9 and 13 do not participate in any organized physical activity outside of school. Nearly one-fourth get no free-time physical activity at all. (Centers for Disease Control, 2003)

Children who watch more than 5 hours of television a day have a 4.6 times greater risk of being overweight than children who watch 0 to 1 hour a day. (CDC, 2002)

It seems that nature has become old-fashioned. The future looms electronic. Perhaps the shift began in 1969 with the debut of *Sesame Street*, the first high-quality, educational television show for toddlers. Big Bird and Ernie were so good at playing, it was more fun to watch them than to do it yourself. Cookie Monster talked to cultural luminaries like Yo Yo Ma, Ralph Nader, and Maya Angelou, so television became “good for” children. Parents welcomed it at first. Then their children grew older, programming quality declined, and parents dreaded the nightly ritual of enforcing limits on television time.

Meanwhile, some urban neighborhoods were becoming dangerous. Pictures of missing children appeared on milk cartons, then arrived in the mail, and parental fears, fanned by publicity, fixated on kidnapping and sexual predation. Children stopped playing in the parks and forest preserves. Kept inside, they needed something to do. When home computers arrived in the early 1980s, software followed a curve similar to that of television programming, beginning with education and devolving into entertaining, often violent games. *Pow, ugh, rat-a-tat-a-tat, boing, ping, eeeee-owwww-puhuuuuu*. Internet access came later and opened a wider universe, for better and worse. By now,

most children have the screen habit. They have stopped wiggling their toes in soft grass and lying on their backs to watch clouds drift across the sky.

Maladies and the Nature Cure

The good news is that researchers are proving nature’s healing power. The natural cure for maladies of the push-button life, such as emotional disorders, ADHD, and childhood obesity, is as natural as can be. And the need for the cure is urgent. Twenty-five percent of US children are overweight, which correlates—not surprisingly—with watching TV for five hours or more each day.

At the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, social psychologist Frances Kuo found that when they had time to play in the green outdoors, children ages 7 to 12 diagnosed with ADHD experienced a 20 percent increase in their ability to concentrate. A father participating in the study said his son, who supposedly couldn’t focus his attention, “fishes for hours at a time, alone.” Spending time outdoors made the boy “very relaxed” and more attentive, which translated into better school performance. “Exposure to ordinary natural settings in the course of common after-school and weekend activities may be

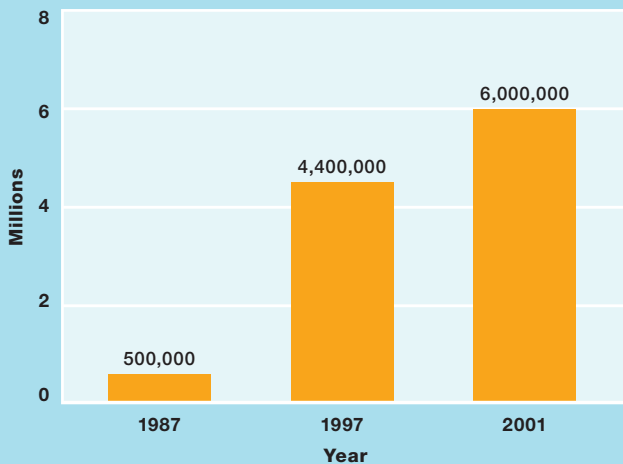
widely effective,” Kuo wrote, for kids who don’t respond to medicine.

Something as simple as spending a half-hour in the park before school can help children with ADHD, millions of whom are currently medicated with stimulants like Ritalin. Kuo found not only that children function better after activities in green settings, but that the “greener” the play area, the less severe the attention deficit symptoms. A study published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* showed that the mere presence of a tree outside the window of a child living in the Robert Taylor homes, Chicago’s recently razed, high-density public apartments, could improve self-discipline, behavior, and academic achievement.

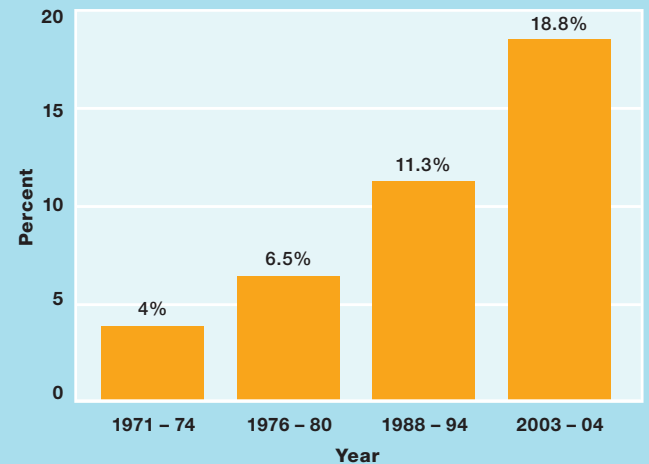
Childhood obesity is epidemic nationwide. Illinois ranks near the national average, but in some Chicago neighborhoods, the rates are alarmingly high. A study by Sinai Health Systems found toddlers to be overweight at the rate of 53 percent in Roseland, 48 percent in North Lawndale and West Town, and 47 percent in Humboldt Park. The statistics reveal disturbing racial and ethnic disparities as well. A 2006 national study of low-income families shows 44 percent of Hispanic toddlers are overweight, compared with 32 percent of either white or black toddlers.

CHILDHOOD MALADIES ON THE RISE

Number of ADHD Diagnoses in the U.S.



Obesity: Percentage in U.S. Children Aged 6–11



Childhood diseases such as obesity and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have increased dramatically in past decades. Are these trends being driven solely by our increasingly sedentary, electronics-driven lifestyle? Or might it be more — a disconnection from green spaces, wild creatures, and fresh air — as some scientists suspect?

Sources: Centers for Disease Control; The Journal of the American Medical Association, 2004

▶▶ ASKING WHY CHILDREN NEED TIME IN NATURE MAY SEEM LIKE ASKING, WHAT'S JAZZ? (IF YOU GOTTA ASK, YOU AIN'T NEVER GONNA KNOW.)

Physical exercise, so basic to a child's well-being, doesn't figure into the daily routines of many children. Yet when children take up physical activity for their own reasons, to run, climb, and build things, they tend to grow fit. By bringing them to engaging places when they're young and letting them play freely, parents help build attachment to the outdoors and a natural sense of play. They also encourage the kind of activity that can lower the risk of diabetes, says Rebecca Lipton, an epidemiologist at the University of Chicago. "Chubby kids tend to be insulin-resistant, or pre-diabetic," she says. "Physical activity does appear to dramatically impact insulin resistance, and that's a big risk factor for diabetes."

Asking why children need time in nature may seem like asking, what's jazz? (If you gotta ask, you ain't never gonna know.) For many, it's obvious that young people need to get out and exercise, but a lot of girls, for instance, aren't doing it. According to a 2005 study by the Girl Scout Research Institute, only a few more than half of 8-to-10-year-old girls are physically active every day. That small number drops dramatically by the time girls reach high school, so that

at the age of 16 and 17, only one in five gets daily exercise by walking, biking, dancing, swimming, running, or playing team sports. The girls surveyed said they prefer to spend their after-school hours on the phone or the computer, which seem to be displacing television slightly as primary pastimes.

At least as troubling, many children are lonely and depressed. On average, they spend more than 60 percent of their computer time alone, according to a 2000 study by the Brookings Institute. Their ability to communicate face-to-face with other children and adults, to read body language and facial expressions, to look people in the eye, to carry on an interesting conversation, must be declining as a result.

Nature-Deficit Disorder

If you care about healthy nature and healthy children, then it's clear that something is very wrong. Parents and teachers sense that it involves a break with the natural world, but they struggle to articulate the problem. That's why so many have pounced on *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, a 2005 book by Richard Louv that makes an impassioned

plea for the rejuvenation of childhood. Louv's wife, Kathy, came up with the term "nature-deficit disorder," which is often quoted along with the comment of a fourth-grade boy in a San Diego school. Asked whether he'd rather play indoors or outdoors, the boy replied, "I like to play indoors better, 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are."

The book offers common ground for discussion and action by presenting new research along with ideas that hark back to Rachel Carson (*The Sense of Wonder*, 1965), Maria Montessori (*Discovery of the Child*, 1909), and Louise Chawla (*Growing Up in an Urbanizing World*, 2001).

Last November, Louv spoke to 400 local environmental educators, parents, and friends at Northwestern University. He could not have found a more enthusiastic audience. The meeting inspired participants to launch a new campaign, "Leave No Child Inside," which freshly welcomes Chicago-area residents to enjoy the region's 300,000 acres of protected forests, prairies, savannas, wetlands, lakes, and other open spaces.

"The meeting was a who's who of environmental education," says Peggy Stewart,



Are outdoor organized sports enough to fend off nature-deficit disorder—or is the connection to nature greater if children participate in other structured outdoor activities such as workdays?

A VIEW ACROSS GENERATIONS



SHARON LEFFINGWELL, 65
Childhood Hours
Outdoors per Week: 55

"I was a regular farmhand growing up in Michigan. Work was play for us, watching mice run out of hay bales, getting my first kiss in the hayloft. It bothers me that my grandchildren aren't experiencing farm life—the love of animals and the freedom."



SHELLEY ANCHETA, 35
Childhood Hours
Outdoors per Week: 48

"When I was 6, I got a pony. I went everywhere on my horse, staying out all day. My sister, brother, and I played in the stream for hours, slipping on rocks and climbing over dead tree branches. I'm sad that my sons might miss what I had."



NATHAN ANCHETA, 6
Childhood Hours
Outdoors per Week: 35

"One time, when I was counting birds with my mom, a hawk landed by me. The hawk was awesome, with pointy ears and yellow eyes like an owl. He thought I was very awesome, too."



CLARA PARKER, 61
Childhood Hours
Outdoors per Week: 0 – 3

"We didn't do anything outside. I can remember being at home. It was to the house and back every day.... I brought up my seven children going to all these free things the park district has outdoors."



VICTORIA PARKER, 34
Childhood Hours
Outdoors per Week: 28

"We'd get out of school, and were outside from four to nine. I jumped rope, played jacks, rode my bike. And then when we went to the country, we'd go swimming, walking, we'd pick corn and peas."



JALEN PARKER, 7
Childhood Hours
Outdoors per Week: 28

"My favorite place outside is with my dog, bouncing the ball with him. I like to go to McDonald's or Burger King. I like video games. I'm going to get Xbox for my birthday, when I turn eight in July."



PATRICIA KAUFMAN, 82
Childhood Hours
Outdoors per Week: 80+

"As a kid, most of my outdoor time was spent with animals on the farm. Exploring the world outside was our full-time playground. We swung across the river on rope-like vines. From collecting baby skunks to getting into poison ivy, we did it all."



LINDA CHENEY, 55
Childhood Hours
Outdoors per Week: 40

"As a kid, I spent time on my grandparents' farm. It was a great change from the hustle of a big city suburb. We spent time riding, playing baseball, and exploring the same woods and fields that my mom and her siblings enjoyed."



LEE CHENEY, 17
Childhood Hours
Outdoors per Week: 9

"As a kid, I did the usual stuff outdoors, played soccer, swam at the local pool. I also went to the local forest preserves with my family and walked. One time we saw a family of deer cross in front of us."

To read extended quotes, visit chicagowildernessmag.org/issues/summer2007/people.html.

manager of outdoor and environmental education for the Chicago Park District. "It was a shot in the arm, reinvigorating our work and validating what we already knew about the importance of letting kids camp, fish, watch birds, and walk in the woods."

Sean Shaffer, a naturalist at the North Park Village Nature Center in Chicago, says the meeting has also led to some programmatic changes. "Louv pushes the importance of unstructured play, so now we have an area where kids can walk off the trail and climb around on a fallen tree."

Louv, in turn, was impressed by the commitment he felt from people he met at the Chicago meeting. "The Chicago Wilderness movement began long before my book was published," he says. "I became convinced that all the regions around the country now attempting to connect the next generation with nature could learn a great deal from Chicago Wilderness's long history." Louv's book now has 145,000 copies in print, and he continues to build a network through his Web site, the Children and Nature Network, cnaturenet.org.

In addition to free play, the most important force in binding children to nature is a caring adult. "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder," Rachel Carson wrote about exploring the Maine coast with her young nephew, "he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."

Often, that adult is a grandparent. "Children love to see the real," says Clara Parker, who, despite winter storm warnings, took her four grandchildren from their South Side home to one of the Chicago Park District's Polar Adventure days at Northerly Island (formerly Meigs Field) last February. Cold wind blew past the winter camping exhibit, while inside, families bustled around a spacious meeting room drinking cocoa and taking a close look at iguanas and birds of prey.

"Most kids see too many pictures, spend too much time with electronic babysitters," says Parker, watching a Siberian husky puppy lick her granddaughter's cheek. "Parents like McDonald's and the iPod

to keep the kids quiet, but the kids need to get outside."

Her daughter, Victoria, agrees. "They need to touch and feel," she says, "and look at the stars. Everyone needs that peace and tranquility. If a certain park doesn't feel safe at a particular time, you can probably find a different park."

Snow fell as icy pellets, but the Parkers zipped up their coats and went outside to board a hay wagon. As they rolled along the lakefront behind white horses, they passed a canvas tent where a man with a long beard, dressed as an early settler, stoked a fire and stirred a pot of fragrant beans and rice.

Children whose parents and grandparents are unavailable can participate, too. Bob Long, Jr., a native South-Sider, takes kids fishing every summer. The Chicago Park District lends out rods and sends children to stocked lagoons and lakefront spots with adult guides. It's catch-and-release for 14,000 children every year, and they can keep trying until they succeed.

"If a child doesn't fish before age 12, he probably won't do it as an adult," says Long,



A pulsing frog prompts delight and caring. The instinctive bond between humans and other living creatures is called biophilia.

LEAVE NO CHILD INSIDE: A CAMPAIGN

Action

In June, the Chicago Wilderness consortium is launching a multi-year campaign called “Leave No Child Inside” aimed at fostering generations of children who care enough for nature to protect it.

The public relations blitz and activities organized by many of the 206 Chicago Wilderness member organizations are part of an effort that seeks to reverse the alarming trend of weakening connections between children and nature. A new Web site — KidsOutside.info — will be a central source of activities for adults and children as well as tips on where to go for unfettered nature discovery.

“Letting the kids simply explore, discover, and bond with nature is so important for healthy development,” notes Chicago Wilderness Executive Director Melinda Pruett-Jones. The other key element for cultivating respect for nature is having a nurturing adult who shares his or her appreciation for the natural world.

Starting next year, Chicago Wilderness organizations will offer innovative new programs to get kids into nature. The campaign will also include workshops for educators, partnerships with community organizations, and efforts to secure state and federal funding to support outdoor programs for children.

In this effort, Chicago Wilderness joins an emerging national movement sparked in large part by the publication of Richard Louv’s book, *Last Child in the Woods*, sounding an urgent call for adults to lead children back to nature. To join the Children & Nature Network, go to cnaturenet.org.

Research

Chicago has also become a center of research in the field of conservation psychology, led by Dr. Carol Saunders, director of communications research and conservation psychology at Brookfield Zoo (CW, Fall ’04). “Kids are naturally curious about animals and plants,” Saunders says. “We are discovering that direct experiences in nature play an important role in the development of caring attitudes and stewardship behaviors.” Saunders and colleagues have designed studies and are observing children at the Hamill Family Play Zoo to learn about the reciprocal relationships between children and other creatures. “Given Chicago Wilderness’ goal of preserving and restoring the biodiversity of this region,” Saunders says, “we particularly want to know what fosters an ethic of care that continues through adult life.” For more, see conservationpsychology.org.



director of the program. “Ask people if they remember their first fish, and they’ll tell you about one they caught when they were 6, 7, or 8. Fishing is some sort of ancient, primordial thing kids just love. They jump and scream, and by the end of the hour, they’re touching the fish, absolutely fascinated.”

Future Stewards and Free Play

Unless children have grown up with a love of special places, they are unlikely to become stewards of the land, says Louise Chawla, a pioneer of research on children’s environments. Chawla interviewed 56 environmentalists at length about their careers, asking them what motivated them to spend countless hours of their time working for environmental causes. In public, they said they were motivated by generalized goals like reducing pollution to improve human health, but in private, regardless of age, nationality, or economic status, they revealed more personal feelings. “They invested themselves because of their experiences of special places in the natural world in childhood or adolescence,” Chawla wrote, “and because some special person directed them to look closely at the plants and animals around them.”

While adults are busy investing themselves in protecting land through nonprofits, the courts, and the political process, they

▶▶ “KIDS DON’T NEED TO BE TOLD WHAT IS SIGNIFICANT IN NATURE. LET THEM ASK THE QUESTIONS. WHEN YOU DISCOVER SOMETHING FOR YOURSELF, IT MEANS SO MUCH MORE TO YOU.”

should leave their children free to play on their own. This is the message of Roger Hart, an environmental psychologist who has done extensive research on children’s direct experience and who works as an advocate for children’s right to play.

“The degree to which play is child-directed is very important,” he says. “Parents should trust their children’s own urges to learn. We need to stop interrupting the building, manipulating, discovering, and inventing that children do on their own. When I watch parents with children,” he adds, “I’m struck by how common it is for parents to interfere just when they shouldn’t. Kids don’t need to be told what is significant in nature. Let them ask the questions. When you discover something for yourself, it means so much more to you.”

Hart is critical of educational methods that prescribe too much, such as assigning monitoring exercises that force children to answer questions they themselves have not posed. Better, he says, to let children explore a new area freely and volunteer their own observations. “It’s all about the sense of wonder,” he says.

The Lure of Camping

Children who are free to take the initiative in nature will come to love it. Those who follow the example of caring adults will learn to protect their environment. Yet the adults, in a literal sense, are losing ground. The Bush administration proposes to sell off national forest land to cover budget shortfalls and fund rural schools. Current mandates require chief rangers to list parcels of public land that could be privatized. In Illinois, 200 acres of the Shawnee National Forest are on the block. The sale of the Owasippe Scout Reservation is not unique. Other scouting organizations have been selling off the very land that has introduced children to the wonder of the natural world for decades. If the Owasippe deal is consummated, 5,000 acres of land perfectly suited to camping, fishing, and canoeing will be carved into 1,200 home sites.

“There was kind of a backlash when we agreed to sell the property,” admits the Boy Scouts’ program director, Chris Townsend, “but we struggle to recruit people to join the Scouts. Kids are invited to join every little club and organization you can imagine. If they have a choice between off-season football or hockey versus the Scouts, a lot of them go with the sport. Besides, scouting is scheduled, and video games you can play any time you want.”

Kirt Manecke, for one, objects to the sale. The founder of LandChoices, a nonprofit that shows landowners ways to protect their land permanently from development, he thinks the land could and should be saved.

“I look at that sale as a cop-out,” he says. “Selling off assets is the easiest way to raise money without making any effort. I agree there’s more competition with computers and sports, but if the Boy Scouts say participation is low, they should be out there with an aggressive PR campaign. If you take kids out camping, they love it!”

Townsend says membership in the Boy Scout council has declined from 15,000 to 3,500 during the last 30 years. Interestingly, membership in the Girl Scouts of Chicago has been consistently higher but also declining, going from 33,700 in 1968 to 11,700 in 2007, according to Julie Somogyi, director of communications and marketing for the Girl Scouts of Chicago.

“All I have to do is say ‘camping’ and I can recruit 40 girls in three days, no problem,” says Coretta Franklin, a lifelong Girl Scout with an infectious smile who now leads a troop of 24 teenagers from Chicago’s South Side. “We go summer, winter, whenever we can.”

Combined, the Girls Scouts’ two camp sites would barely cover one-tenth of the Owasippe property. Thousands of girls camp there each year, including 175 who live in public housing. A grant from Chicago’s Department of Children and Youth Services sends these girls to day camp for a week and then on to total-immersion residential camping for a second week.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Here are a few ways you can nurture kids in nature:

- 1** ▶ **Explore a forest preserve** nearby after work or during lunch hour. Find a place you like and make it part of your day, visiting early and late, in all seasons. Take a notebook and draw, paint, or write.
- 2** ▶ **Take children hiking** when they’re young, beginning with a backpack that holds them up at your eye level, to see what you see. When they’re big enough to walk on their own, let them. Take them to a place with a pond or a stream and let them throw stones, hit the water with sticks, or do whatever they want that seems safe and non-destructive.
- 3** ▶ **Encourage older children** to visit parks and preserves with their friends and to take a cell phone, if you’re concerned about safety.
- 4** ▶ **Encourage your elementary school to participate in Mighty Acorns**, a program for 4th–6th graders to learn hands-on nature stewardship.
- 5** ▶ **Join a bird-watching group.** Join 46 millions Americans to enjoy one of the nation’s fastest growing outdoor activities.
- 6** ▶ **Try camping.** Start locally with “catered camping,” and then try a night or two of car camping on your own, using a portable BBQ grill if you don’t have a cook stove. Car camping in state parks is an easy first venture.
- 7** ▶ **Don’t stop** when your own children have grown up. Take your grandchildren, the kids next door. Volunteer to be a Big Brother or Big Sister. Take a child who would not otherwise have the chance to go. Help lead a Scout troop.
- 8** ▶ **Help restore** nearby nature by volunteering for habitat restoration work days. Activities include collecting seeds, pulling weeds, and cutting brush.
- 9** ▶ **Donate to organizations** that take kids outside and teach them to value nature’s complexity, like the Mighty Acorns summer camp program of Chicago Wilderness and Adopt-a-School at the Indiana Dunes Environmental Learning Center.

Photo: Lynn M. Stone



Nature is the real Discovery Zone—not manipulated, organized, or structured. Unfettered play is essential for healthy development.

“It’s so relaxing to be away from people and to be outside,” says Dominique Mitchell, one of the 24 teenagers in Franklin’s troop, all of whom started scouting in elementary school. Now a tenth grader at the Chicago High School for Agricultural Science, Mitchell works on a farm with chickens, pigs, and sheep during school hours. On weekends she takes younger girls camping and helps them get through the bumpy first night. “I cried the first night, I was so scared and homesick,” she remembers. “I took all the wrong things, like shorts and sandals for camping in October. They told me what to bring, but I didn’t read it. It was bad. Now I see other girls go through the same thing. The little ones think there’s going to be bears and lions in the woods. They want your cell phone to call their mama, but we keep them busy, and they all end up having a good time.”

Beyond the social richness of the experience, says Theresa Salus, program director for the Chicago Girl Scouts, the girls list their favorite activities as playing outside, roasting marshmallows, canoeing, swimming, fishing, scavenger hunts, and night hikes. “It’s interesting to watch them realize what they need and don’t need,” says Salus. “They don’t need radios and hair straightener. They do need the experience of camping, which helps them grow confident and learn how to get along with each other.

When we ask them what they learned,” she says, “we get answers like, ‘how to control my cool,’ ‘not to be two-faced,’ and ‘tie hair back while lighting campfire.’ Most of the girls who try it come back again.”

Families that have never camped before can start with the Chicago Park District, which provides tents, sleeping bags, and cooked meals for an overnight at one of several Chicago parks. This “catered camping” experience, with a fee of \$40 that includes take-home sleeping bags, is intended to break the ice for first-time campers, give them an enjoyable experience, and encourage them to try their own adventures, says program director Marija Maric.

Parental Fear

To stay in daily contact with the natural world, children need to find places to be outdoors but close to home. By foot, bicycle, or public transportation, most can, in theory, reach a park or forest. The problem is, many caregivers are afraid to let their children go. Parental fear is the biggest obstacle between children and the outdoors, according to Louv, and local educators agree.

“It’s discouraging when I hear about kids not wanting to go outside,” says Linda Davis, head of the adolescent program of the Montessori School of Lake Forest. “Some of it comes from them, but I also think parents give a lot of strong, subliminal messages

about the world not being a safe place. They’re worried about kidnapping and that kind of thing.”

Abductions by strangers are extremely rare, and fears of human predation in forests and parks far exceed their actual occurrence. Still, if the one in a million turns out to be one’s own child, statistics don’t matter.

John Elliott, director of education for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, advises new visitors to take it easy. Families can begin by visiting one of the county’s six nature centers and taking a walk guided by a staff member. Explore on your own around the center, he advises, and then move on to the area around a paved bike path. Staying within shouting distance of the path, you’ll get the benefits of solitude and be close to a friendly human presence. On “workdays,” volunteers spread out in a preserve to plant or collect seeds, clear brush, and learn how to tell native plants from invaders. Spend time in the woods or prairies nearby, Elliott suggests. Better yet, grab a shovel and help.

Generalized fears sometimes focus on specific aspects of the outdoors, such as wild animals or germs. At the Prairie Crossing Charter School in Grayslake, which has an environmentally based curriculum, parents express those fears even though they have chosen to send their children to a school with a hands-on farming program.

“What lurks in the manure?” says Myron Dagley, the school’s director. “Parents worry

▶ PARENTAL FEAR IS THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THE OUTDOORS, ACCORDING TO LOUVV, AND LOCAL EDUCATORS AGREE.

about that. I think that aspect of the farm school becomes the focus of more generalized fears. We've become a fearful generation, worried about crazy people kidnapping our children." Like most fears, they attach to the unknown. Parents learn to relax as they help make and serve lunch at school using eggs collected by the kindergartners and vegetables grown by the seventh graders. "The word is out," says Dagley, "and now parents who don't have students enrolled here still want their children to be part of the farm program."

Not every school can have a working farm, but other schools may find it valuable to use another of Prairie Crossing's nature-connecting traditions. Each student chooses a magic spot at school and visits it as a quiet place to sit and look, draw pictures, and write in a journal. As students grow older they find magic spots closer to home, which they use for similar purposes. The idea is to cultivate a habit that will last a lifetime.

And while not every child attends a school with an environmentally based curriculum, any school group in metropolitan Chicago or northwest Indiana can sign up for a two- or three-day trip to the sand dunes, wetlands, savannas, and beaches at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. The Indiana Dunes Environmental Learning Center operates year-round to teach school groups of up to 70 students and 10 adult chaperones about ecology, and to put them up in cabins overnight. Supported by the National Park Service and modest tuition fees, the center also relies on private donations through its Adopt-a-School program.

If the fourth graders who enjoyed the place at the end of March are typical, it's a memorable time. The kids listened to trilling frogs, peeked inside skunk cabbage pods, hiked through oak savannas, played frisbee, roasted marshmallows, sang funny songs, and watched colors brighten at dusk where the lake meets the sky. These African-American kids came from Claremont Academy, located near Marquette Park in Chicago. Not one of them had ever been to the dunes before, camped before, or run on the beach before. One had visited a state



Photos opposite page, left to right: Katherine Millett, Gerald D. Tang, Lynda Wallis; Photo this page: Lynda Wallis

or federal park—once. At home, none of them is allowed to walk around the block alone.

After school, they say, they play video games, do homework, watch television, and rearrange their rooms. When their guide for the day, Erica Schneider, asked whether they would come back to the dunes again, they exploded with a jubilant “Yes!”

“I won’t be offended if you say no,” she told them, but they insisted that they meant it. If they could come back, she asked, what would they do?

“I’d bring my little sister,” said one boy, “and show her the deer we saw the first day.”

“I’d take my grandma to the woods,” said a girl.

“I’d tell my mom to do the night hike,” said another boy. “She’d be scared at first, but then she’d like it.”

On the first night, the children were called out of their cabins to get ready for the night hike. It was too dark to see much except shadows and the crescent moon. They clustered together, and flashlight beams streaked the cool air.

“No flashlights,” said their instructor. “We’re going to do a solo walk. Who wants to walk 50 yards alone in the dark?” Silence. There was no pressure to take the walk, and it would have been okay to do it with a buddy. Yet slowly, one by one, each child took the walk alone. No one fell in a hole or got bitten by a rattlesnake. No hungry lions or bears came out of the woods. All the bad people in the world were busy doing something else, far from the peace of the



“Grandma, look!” Two sets of eyes are better than one.

dunes. The night belonged to these fourth graders and their growing friendships, the chirping tree frogs, and the two deer that ran just ahead of the children, enticing them onward.

No one felt the beauty of the place more than Tony Fields, an adult chaperone. On the brisk morning after the night hike, he was walking behind the group, watching

for stragglers and soaking up the peace and quiet of a day in the woods. “This is my kind of place,” he said, shaking his head. “I have a tremendous appreciation for nature, anyplace that doesn’t have people in it. I used to ride my bike all over Grant and Lincoln Parks,” he recalls, “but these kids are video game junkies. Walking in a place like this and being quiet is totally foreign to them. In the branch library where I work, kids never check out nature books unless they have to read them for an assignment.

“But look at them,” Fields said, noticing a group of kids at the edge of the trail. “They’re getting into this.”

The kids clustered around Schneider, who crouched over a hillside dotted with sandy little mounds like anthills. Using a long piece of grass, she was fishing for ant lions, wasps, or whatever else might live inside one of the mounds. The kids’ heads bent lower and lower, closer to the hole. “Aaaaaaah!” In unison, they jumped back as a wasp charged from its burrow.

The neighborhood “prairies” of our youth may be gone, but the human need to spend time outdoors, in special places touched by wildness, persists. Only together can we protect our private havens, and if we ignore them, they will go away. It isn’t just that kids need nature. Nature needs kids.

Photo: Joe Nowak

CHICAGO WILDERNESS SPECIAL REPORTS

▶ What is Chicago Wilderness?

Chicago Wilderness Magazine is a quarterly magazine that celebrates the rich natural heritage of this region and tells the inspiring stories of the people and organizations working to heal and protect local nature. chicagowildernessmag.org

Chicago Wilderness, the Consortium, is an unprecedented alliance of 206 public and private organizations working together to study and restore, protect, and manage the precious natural ecosystems of the Chicago region for the benefit of the public. www.chicagowilderness.org

Chicago Wilderness, the Region, is some of the finest and most significant nature in the temperate world, with a core of roughly 300,000 acres of protected natural lands harboring native plant and animal communities that are globally rare.

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▶ About the author

Katherine Millett is a freelance writer whose sons dug for treasure in the backyard when they were little but stopped going outside when they became teenagers. She is glad they play music and hopes they will again find treasure outdoors. Her work appears in *Chicago Magazine*, *Chicago WILDERNESS*, *The Chicago Tribune Magazine*, *The Strad*, *Strings Magazine*, *Climbing, Rock & Ice*, and other publications.

▶ Special Report

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