

Nature's Lost Children

BY KIMBERLEY K. YABLONSKI



With an ever increasing mound of scientific research indicating that kids who spend time outside tend to be smarter, happier, and healthier, the idea that children need nature is not novel. Yet it seems to get lost in our technology-crazed world—where one's only connection to nature might be the bird symbol he or she sees when sending a tweet on Twitter. This disconnect did not happen overnight.

Richard Louv coined it “nature deficit disorder” in his book, *Last Child in the Woods*. He highlights the benefits of connecting kids with nature and the harm that comes from the lack of it. “Nature—the sublime, the harsh, and the beautiful—offers something that the street or gated community, or computer game cannot. Nature presents

the young with something so much greater than they are; it offers an environment where they can easily contemplate infinity and eternity,” Louv writes.

Many individuals agree with Louv and are attacking this problem by providing what used to be the norm ... a safe outside place to explore, play, and learn.

TURNER NATURE CENTER

The Beau Turner Youth Conservation Center (BTYCC) in northwest Florida is one such place. Against advice from other private landowners, Beau Turner, an avid outdoorsman, dedicated 160 acres of his property to create a center where kids can experience the outdoors. The BTYCC, the first

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of its kind in Florida, offers children of all ages opportunities to fish, earn hunter-safety certification, practice archery on the Olympic-style and 3-D archery courses, hike nature trails, and view wildlife.

“We must engage kids to keep them outdoors,” said Beau Turner, a strong environmental advocate and youngest son of media mogul Ted Turner. “I’m starting to see the outdoorsman—the hunter and fisherman—on the verge of becoming extinct.”

In an effort to stem the tide, Turner teamed up with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) in early 2008. The FWC provides a variety of free classes, summer camps, and events at the youth center. Involved in every aspect of developing the BTYCC, Turner built a pavilion structure and playground on the property at his own expense. He has also opened up an additional 900-acre block

of land to hunts that the FWC conducts for youth.

Turner, who is Director of Natural Resources for Turner Enterprises, Inc., describes himself as “kind of nuts about the environment.” He wanted to share what kept him outside as a child. “I live and recreate on our lands. In the United States, we’ve got all these parks and public lands but they are in areas only the wealthy can get to,” he said. “How many inner-city Tallahassee kids can get to a national park?” To date, more than 3,000 children have taken part in some type of outdoor activity that the center has offered.

In his early 40s, Turner is passing on his love of the outdoors to his young son and to as many young people as the BTYCC can recruit. “It is more about bringing the local community together around the youth center to get them engaged and have ownership in the entire project,” he said. He hopes the BTYCC will become a national model



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and aims to eventually open similar centers in Montana, New Mexico, and South America.

The center provides a piece of what experts say is essential in human connections to land—direct contact. Louv writes: “Immersion in the natural environment cuts to the chase, exposes the young directly and immediately to the very elements from which humans evolved: earth, wind, air and other living kin, large and small.”

MOSS

The Montana Outdoor Science School (MOSS) in Bozeman, Mont., has been taking kids outside to educate them about the natural world for 15 years. In 1994, three

women launched MOSS, a non-profit group that provides children with quality, outdoor, science-based experiences. The year-round “school” offers courses in everything from the study of birds to avalanche awareness.

“We all recognize the value in getting children outdoors,” says Liz Harrison, MOSS executive director. “We just know it is good for kids to get outside and get in a creek, get their feet wet and touch tadpoles. There is a literacy and joy that comes with that and you cannot get it from computers.”

Founders Louise Forrest, Martha Kauffman, and Martha Collins started MOSS as a summer day camp with the goal



of providing fun, hands-on nature experiences. With backgrounds as educators, scientists, authors, and moms, the three women built curriculum that coincides with state and local standards to foster partnerships with schools. About 7,500 participants take part each year in courses that range from tracking wolves in Yellowstone (for high school kids) to exploring overturned rocks in a nearby creek. The classes range in cost and are not didactic, Harrison says. "The approach is multidisciplinary. We take it into the field and make it fun." For example, one instructor baked cupcakes with different colored layers of batter to teach the kids about core samples of rocks. Then, the kids got to eat the lesson.

MOSS also hosts events such as the Watershed Festival and Bridger Raptor Festival to help educate the broader public.

It's not just about play. One of MOSS's missions is to promote appreciation of the natural world and encourage

open-ended questions. Harrison believes MOSS is raising future environmentalists, although it is not the school's focus. "You won't stand up for a river unless you've been in it or fight for wolves in Yellowstone if you've never experienced it," she said.

HANDS ON NATURE

Heather Simpson is a woman on a mission. Founder of Hands on Nature, Simpson wanted to offer a program "where the kids are outside getting their hands dirty."

About three years ago, she launched her program for 4- to 12- year olds. Operated out of Simpson's home in Berlin, Mass., just West of Boston, Hands on Nature offers after-school programs, lessons for homeschooled children, summer day camps, and birthday parties. Simpson uses an adjacent woods, nearly a hundred acres where hiking trails are maintained, for exploration. "We go out into the woods



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and collect salamanders, go frog catching, and get giant bullfrog tadpoles,” Simpson says.

Her sessions usually run five weeks and the themes change with the seasons. Whatever will get, and keep, kids outside she is willing to try. For example, she recently took a troop of Girl Scouts on night hikes to see owls.

A mother of three young boys, Simpson says the program is important to her because “we need to create future stewards of the land. If we don’t get the kids to fall in love with nature like we did they won’t want to protect it.”

Contact with nature is the key component. “Right

now, the kids can tell you about an exotic rainforest but can’t tell you how the grass smells outside their front door. One child was fearful that a panther would attack him. I told him, we are in New England, there are no panthers,” Simpson said. Louv has spawned a movement aptly named, No Child Left Inside. “It takes time—loose, unstructured dreamtime—to experience nature in a meaningful way,” he writes. A sentiment Simpson wholeheartedly shares.

“I just saw the kids were not getting out as much. I created Hands on Nature, put it out there and it just filled up. It evolved as the need grew. Some parents, fearful about



safety, don't allow their kids outside. We know there are reasons for some of these fears but the need is still there; just that fact alone, made me want to do it."

Feedback has been positive and the kids keep coming back. Parents have thanked Simpson for doing what they aren't doing ... getting their kids out in nature. Although she initially tried to have a more structured program indoors before heading outside, she realized that the best classroom was on the rocks and trails. Once while walking in the woods with students in the after-school program, a young girl said to her, "You know when you have a really bad day but then you walk out in the woods and everything is okay again?" Simpson replied, "Yeah, I do."

At the root of the reasons prompting private landowners and non-profit groups to step up to provide a child/nature

connection might be the words of famous naturalist John Muir, who was instrumental in establishing Yosemite National Park—"When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world."



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