

No More "Nature-Deficit Disorder"

The "No Child Left Inside" movement.

Some say the future isn't what it used to be. Here's a different view. The future is going to be better than it used to be -- at least when it comes to the human connection to nature.

In "Last Child in the Woods," I described what I called "nature-deficit disorder." I hesitated (briefly) to use the term; our culture is overwrought with medical jargon. But we needed a language to describe the change, and this phrase rang true to parents, educators, and others who had noticed the change. Nature-deficit disorder is not a formal diagnosis, but a way to describe the psychological, physical and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature, particularly for children in their vulnerable developing years.

In the four years since publication of "Last Child" (with an updated and expanded edition in 2008), the gap has grown wider.

Consider the 2008 Recreation Participation Report," released this month. The report is based on a survey of more than 60,000 Americans, covering 114 different outdoor activities; it represents a collaborative effort by The Outdoor Foundation, Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association, and other outdoor recreation groups. Among its findings: adult participation is up slightly -- very slightly. But the survey also found a decline of more than 11 percent of participation in outdoor activities among young people age 6 to 17, with the sharpest decline among youngsters ages 6 to 12. We already knew that kids were becoming more disconnected in nature in recent decade -- but that's an additional 11 percent decline in a single year.

Consider, too, the decision by the publisher of the Oxford Junior Dictionary to replace dozens of nature-related words like "beaver" and "dandelion" with "blog" and "MP3 player." As noted wildlife artist and conservationist Robert Bateman observed, "If you can't name things,

how can you love them? And if you don't love them, then you're not going to care a hoot about protecting them or voting for issues that would protect them." In a few words, literally, this story illustrates the urgency to connect children directly to the natural world, and our ultimate goal – deep cultural change.

Still, there's reason for hope. Just look how far the children and nature movement -- or the No Child Left Inside movement, as it's sometimes called -- has come in such a short time. The real miracle is the rapidly growing network of thousands of individuals, families and organizations that have made this movement their own.

We have a long way to go, but the grassroots are growing; and so are the netroots.

We've seen evidence of this miracle in the growth of regional campaigns across the country, as reported and encouraged by the Children & Nature Network. Between 2006 and 2008, C&NN helped galvanize over 50 regional and statewide campaigns in North America. We've watched the environmental organizations take this issue to heart, with the Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, the Conservation Fund, National Audubon, Hooked on Nature, the Trust for Public Land and many other groups supporting more programs that connect kids to nature and promote changes in public policies.

Last year's most visible legislative success came in September, when the U.S. House of Representatives passed the No Child Left Inside Act, sponsored by the No Child Left Inside Coalition. If approved this year in the Senate, the bill will -- hopefully, in some form -- help the states support environmental education.

In Canada, the Nature Child Reunion and the Robert Bateman Get to Know Program, are quickening their strides. And through the efforts of C&NN President Dr. Cheryl Charles, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, at its World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, officially designated connecting children with nature as an international priority.

These are just a few of our shared milestones.

Now comes 2009, and the beginning of a new era – with new opportunities to strengthen ties and build new relationships.

The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA), for example, has presented recommendations to President-elect Obama. AFWA

listed children and nature as No. 2 in their roster of five Priorities of a National Agenda for State Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Other conservation-related initiatives are in the works.

We're pleased that the incoming Obama administration has indicated there will be expanded federal emphasis on early childhood education. With that in mind, many of us believe that the child-nature connection and environmental literacy should be considered as fundamental elements of children's cognitive development, as well as their psychological and physical health. Future education reform must widen the definition of the classroom. To help young people learn in nature, not just about nature, policy-makers must view parks, wildlands, farms and ranches as the new schoolyards. We'll push for an expansion of the number of nature-oriented preschools, including experiential education and greened schoolyards in Head Start.

This month, in an article titled "Nature Makes a Comeback in Wisconsin Schools," the Wisconsin State Journal reported: "To reconnect children to nature, school districts are expanding school forests around the state while also developing low-cost, small projects such as rain gardens that can be effective even in poor urban areas." Many of us would like to see more progress like that.

In 2009, education reform must also be about a reformation of values, not just the distribution of more information.

Consider the words of Oberlin professor David Orr, one of the world's foremost proponents of environmental literacy and a leading voice on climate change. In his seminal essay, "What Is Education For," he describes "the way our education has prepared us for how to think about the natural world." Orr argues correctly that more education "is no guarantee of decency, prudence, or wisdom. More of the same kind of education will only compound our problems." The worth of education "must now be measured against the standards of decency and human survival. The truth is that many things on which your future health and prosperity depend are in dire jeopardy: climate stability, the resilience and productivity of natural systems, the beauty of the natural world, and biological diversity."

Orr has also taken note of nature-deficit disorder -- which belongs on this list, and is linked to each of these priorities. A growing movement will continue to make the case that a meaningful human relationship

with nature, shaped in children's formative years, is crucial to our society's practice of stewardship, its sense of community, and the strength of family bonds. We also believe that natural play will increasingly be recognized as a key element in any successful effort to turn the tide on child obesity.

The emerging body of scientific knowledge supports these theses, but more research is needed. In November, the first National Children and Nature Research Summit, co-sponsored by Yale University, the University of Minnesota, and the Children & Nature Network, brought together 20 eminent scholars and practitioners from throughout the United States to address the importance of nature in children's lives, to identify strengths and gaps in current knowledge, and to establish general principles and guidelines for inquiry.

In the meantime, C&NN continues to report the growing body of correlative research. Among the studies published in major journals in recent months: a new one from Andrea Faber Taylor and Francis Kuo showing that children with ADHD concentrate better after walking in a park; UK research finding that living near parks and woods boosts health, regardless of social class; and in October, researchers at Indiana University School of Medicine-Purdue University and the University of Washington reported that greener neighborhoods are associated with slower increases in children's body mass, regardless of residential density. One reason that last point is important, as Kuo says, is that it dispels the mistaken assumption that more green equals more sprawl.

We need nearby nature everywhere, especially in the most urban neighborhoods.

That principle must be among the central precepts of any planning for the future of urban design, education, and health care – and should be at the forefront of any discussion of child obesity by agencies of the Obama Administration. As Howard Frumkin often says, "Yes, we need more research, but we know enough to act."

This brings us to the need to examine how we act. In the current economic climate, we need a new model for change – and new tools to stimulate cultural transformation. That transformation is most likely to occur at the personal and neighborhood level, where we live, work and play -- through what might be called "social-nature networking."

Across the country, urban planners, neighborhood organizations and community action groups, along with such organizations as the Trust for Public Land, are beginning to join forces to protect the remaining islands of urban nature – and create new ones. One possibility: neighbors working with conservancy groups to establish what might be called “nearby-nature trusts.”

Using new and old tools of social networking, families can band together to experience outdoors adventures -- two, three, five families agreeing to meet, say, at a county park on Saturdays. Coming soon: an easily downloaded C&NN Family Nature Clubs Tool Kit designed to give families the tools and inspiration they need to take action in their own lives – without waiting for programs or funding. Also coming in 2009: campaigns to engage grandparents and young people themselves as leaders in the movement. These initiatives will be featured as part of the upcoming Children and Nature Awareness Month, in April.

Think how the lives of our children – our lives, too – would improve if such social-nature networking were to spread as quickly as book clubs and Neighborhood Watches did in recent decades or the use of social networking tools did during the 2008 presidential campaign.

In the coming years, young people will discover or create fulfilling careers in the fields and professions that connect people to nature; they will become biophilic architects and urban designers, nature therapists, natural play organizers and natural teachers -- and assume careers that have yet to be named.

Despite the current rash of bad news, we may be seeing the emergence of a new landscape: the fading of our society's nature-deficit disorder, and the rise of human restoration through nature. Farfetched? Maybe. But as the poet Emily Dickinson wrote: “Hope is the thing with feathers/That perches in the soul/And sings the tune without the words/And never stops – at all.”

The future: better than it used to be.