

Parks & Recreation: The Gift of Nature

Parks & Recreation – May 01, 2009

By Richard Louv

On January 30, 2009, Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, at his first press conference as governor, vowed to do something about the gap between today's children and the natural world. (His predecessor, Gov. Rod Blagojevich, had closed seven parks in a budget-cutting move.) "I recently read a book," Quinn said. "It talked about nature-deficit disorder where we should leave no child inside." That would be music to the ears of any author whose book had coined a phrase. But better yet, Quinn followed through on his pledge two months later.

On March 5, he reopened seven state parks, arguing again that Illinois children deserved every chance to connect with nature. To this, he added a more direct economic argument: State parks bring tourism dollars to the state and also are important for local residents who can't afford to go on vacations during tough economic times.

Quinn's decision coincided with ongoing efforts by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and by the state's Leave No Child Inside initiative, launched in 2007 by Chicago Wilderness, a coalition of more than 240 public and private organizations.

The Illinois initiative is one of more than 50 regional campaigns that have sprung up in the United States and Canada over the past three years, which together comprise a growing international network of thousands of individuals, families, and organizations building a movement to enable kids to get outdoors.

These campaigns include local, state, and national park and recreation agencies; educators; health care professionals; conservationists; children; college students; government officials; and businesspeople. Major conservation groups, including the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, the National Wildlife Federation, and the National Audubon Society, have intensified their efforts to get kids outdoor.

Federal agencies—including the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service—have launched their own programs. Last year, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the No Child Left Inside Act, designed to support environmental education. Currently, the Senate is considering the legislation, sponsored by the No Child Left Inside Coalition of more than 1,140 other organizations.

Nonetheless, the race is far from won. Indicative of a continuing decrease in the time that kids spend in outdoor recreation or independent play, the publisher of the Oxford Junior Dictionary decided this year to replace dozens of nature-related words, such as "beaver" and "dandelion," with "blog" and "MP3 player."

Meanwhile, childhood problems associated with lack of outdoor play are growing, including depression, attention deficit and other cognitive difficulties, and obesity.

Last year, The New York Times reported that "a growing number of children are taking drugs

for a wide range of chronic conditions related to childhood obesity.”

The numbers, provided by several health-related organizations, “indicate that hundreds of thousands of children are taking medication to treat Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and acid reflux—all problems linked to obesity that were practically unheard of in children two decades ago.”

As the movement grows, so does the awareness that we need to support the programs that connect kids to nature. But we also need to promote deep cultural change. Gary Knell, president and CEO of Sesame Workshop, recently announced that the set of “Sesame Street,” after 40 years as a brick and asphalt setting, will soon include nature as an important element. That’s good news, and so are the emerging public awareness programs, such as Nature Rocks, sponsored by eco America, the Children & Nature Network, and other organizations.

But we also need to create ways for families to take action on their own, without waiting for funding. In fact, difficult economic times may help change the culture. True, spending more time outdoors can’t pay the mortgage or immediately replace a lost job, but for stressed-out families, a nature stimulus package may be just what the doctor—and the economist—ordered. In the currency of physical, emotional, and even economic health, reconnecting kids to nature will translate into big dividends. Here are some examples:

- As gas prices fluctuate and rise, many families are rediscovering both the joy and the cost-effectiveness of getaways in nearby nature, including regional, state, or national parks. As *Outside* magazine puts it, “Near is the new far.” Between 2007 and 2008, the popularity of outdoor camping jumped 7.4 percent, according to a report from the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association.
- Creating outdoor classrooms costs far less than building a new brick and mortar wing on a school, and students learn better when schools promote place-based learning in the largest classroom of all: the natural world. In Scandinavian countries, where “all-weather” schools require students to spend time outside every day, kids get fewer colds and bouts of flu.
- Backyard or community gardens offer improved nutrition and, for the wider society, reduced long-distance shipping costs. On the first day of spring, First Lady Michelle Obama set a wonderful example. With her daughters—and about two dozen local students—she broke ground for the White House vegetable garden. Not only could “recession gardens” help reconnect children to nature and the sources of our food, but similar efforts could encourage families all over the world to replace the monocultures of their backyards with the biodiversity of native species, including plants that revive butterfly migration routes and fading bird populations. This, in turn, will help create a stronger constituency for wilderness preservation and for parks.
- Investing in nature saves health dollars and improves property values. One recent study shows that—even in inner cities—the greener the neighbourhood, the lower the rate of obesity. Playgrounds with more trees generally have lower crime rates. By planting trees and community gardens and opening up new expanses of nearby nature in our cities, we can improve energy efficiency, reduce the carbon footprint, and protect property values. Studies by the Trust for Public Land show that adjacent parks and nature trails are consistently associated with higher home resale values.

- The family that plays outside together stays together. Nature also can help us build social capital. In hard times, we need cohesive neighborhoods and supportive kinship networks more than ever. Park programs—from Connecticut’s No Child Left Inside to Texas’ Life’s Better Outside—have helped boost park attendance by promoting family bonding, away from video games and other distractions.

Last year, I received an email from Chip Donahue, a father of three and a 2nd-grade teacher in Roanoke, Virginia. After reading *Last Child in the Woods*, Chip and his wife, Ashley, felt challenged to enjoy more time in nature with their kids. They began to spend most weekends on family hikes and other outdoor adventures. One day, their 5-year-old son asked, “Why are we the only family having this much fun?” Over a Christmas break, the Donahues mapped out a monthly outdoor adventure schedule for the coming year and decided to invite their neighbours to join the first adventure.

Within a few months, the Donahues had close to 200 families on their email list. The member families—two, three, or five at a time—agree to meet on Saturdays or Sundays at a park or some other nature venue, where they experience the natural world (and green exercise) together.

Family nature clubs, and similar approaches, provide a greater sense of safety for fearful parents. They can be created in any neighbourhood, whether inner city, suburban, or rural. The clubs can be joined or created by any kind of family. They increase motivation; it’s much more likely that a family will show up at a park on Saturday morning if they know there’s another family waiting for them. And, importantly, there’s no need to wait for funding. Families can do this themselves, and they can do it now.

Similar approaches are catching on. Parent volunteers from the Orange County, New York, Audubon Society, concerned about how empty local trails had become, have initiated a free family nature study club called Nature Strollers. Along the same lines, families and individuals in the United Kingdom are banding together to create “green gyms” for regular outdoor exercise.

In March, President Barack Obama spoke to 500 employees of the Department of Interior. He described the sacred trust of our nation’s natural areas, saying “the importance of which cannot be measured merely by the acres we protect, the miles of rivers we preserve, the energy we draw from public lands.” The value of these sacred places is also “a child wandering amidst ancient redwoods, a love for science spurred as she looks skyward ... a family hiking along canyons carved by ancient floods or mountains shaped by shifting continents finding peace in the beauty of the natural world.”

Such experiences, he said, enrich our lives and remind us of our shared blessings. “That was certainly the case for me,” he continued, reminding the audience that he had spent much of his childhood in Hawaii, home to several national parks. Before he turned 11, his grandmother decided it was time for him to see the mainland. “So my grandmother, my mother, my sister, and I all flew to Seattle, and we drove down ... the coast of California and then east to the Grand Canyon,” he said. “We headed across the Great Plains and to the Great Lakes before heading back west through Yellowstone. It was an experience I will never forget.

“It’s an experience I want for my daughters and for all of our daughters and sons, to see the incredible beauty of this nation. It’s an experience that’s only possible because of the work you do each and every day.”

To this we can add: Every child deserves to experience our parks, and all children—no matter where they live—deserve the gifts of nature.

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