

Environment awareness

No child left inside

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Put down that Xbox, young man

TO THE alarm of environmentalists and park managers alike, interest in the great outdoors seems to be tailing off among young Americans. The country's extensive system of national parks includes some of the most photographed and best preserved landscapes on earth—like Yosemite Valley in California, the crenellated Teton Range in Wyoming, Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone National Park or the white edifice of Mount Rainier in Washington state. But attendance at the parks is falling. Between 1995 and 2005, overnight stays in them declined 20% overall, and camping and backcountry stays dropped by 24%, according to statistics compiled by the National Parks Service.

No park, it seems, is immune to the decline: even in Yosemite, one of the system's oldest parks and probably its best known, the number of visitors dropped 17% over the ten-year period. The number of visitors to Death Valley, an easy drive from vigorously growing Las Vegas, went down 28% over the same span. In some of the system's remoter parks, such as Lava Beds National Monument near the California-Oregon border, site of much fighting in an Indian war of 1872-73, the number of daily visitors is down to ten or fewer.

The importance of this decline can hardly be over-estimated for big environmental organisations such as the Sierra Club: they have depended on what one expert calls “a transcendent experience in nature”, usually in childhood, to gain new members and thus remain powerful lobbyists for environmental causes. “The political implications are enormous,” says Richard Louv, a writer whose most recent book, “Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder”, describes the social, psychological and even spiritual ramifications of a dearth of outdoors experience for a generation raised on electronic, rather than natural, stimulation and entertainment.

To encourage environmental interest in young people, particularly non-whites who are much less like to visit parks than whites are, Martin LeBlanc at the Sierra Club manages 65 volunteer-led programmes around the country to bring inner-city children into direct experience with the natural world. “We

don't need to be giving them propaganda about offshore oil-drilling, not when they're 13 years old," he said. "We just need to get them outside."

For its part, the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has had its "Ranger Rick" magazine and education programme for children in place for 40 years, but Kevin Coyle, the group's vice-president for education, thinks that the declining interest in the outdoors has spurred a feeling of urgency among environmentalists. "There won't be a conservation movement 30 years from now if there's no love for nature," he says.

The NWF has created a new "green hour a day" programme to encourage families to spend at least an hour a day outside; a website with green-hour activities will go live in March. The group has also joined with traditional hunting and sportsmen's organisations, which are also experiencing declining membership and interest, to lobby state governments for more outdoor-education funding.

Mr Louv, the writer, has been busy as well, helping local, state and national groups bring America's children outdoors under a campaign he calls "No Child Left Inside". He is pleased by the idea's wide appeal. "This issue has the power to pull people together from sectors you wouldn't expect. Environmentalists are traditionally liberal, but conservatives, too, are worried about children and nature," he said. "It's a grass-roots movement in both the literal and metaphoric senses".

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