

Leave No Child Indoors  
Pennsylvania Governor's Conference on the Outdoors  
Larry Schweiger  
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It is great to be back home among so many dear friends and former colleagues.

Let me start by thanking Governor Ed Rendell for his leadership:

- \*\* In convening this important conference;
- \*\* For renewed funding for Growing Greener;
- \*\* For advancing green energy solutions to curb global warming and;
- \*\* For his courageous action to stop mercury from polluting fish and those who catch and eat them.

I want to also acknowledge my friend Michael DiBerardinis for his able leadership as the second secretary of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. From his eight-year history as Recreation Commissioner to the city of Philadelphia, Mike understands the urgency of getting kids outdoors. He knows the Commonwealth holds vast areas of forests, beautiful rivers, lakes, and streams, thousands of miles of greenways, trails and some of the world's most famous urban and state parks; all available for Pennsylvanians and visitors to enjoy. Mike and his DCNR administration have built upon a wonderful Pennsylvania tradition of caring for our natural resources.

Pennsylvanians have long held and have been deeply committed to the preservation of nature in the face of an urbanizing society. Pennsylvania has a proud tradition as a National leader in fish and wildlife conservation, watershed restoration, ecological protection, outdoor programming, and community recreation. Many years ago Pennsylvania was the first state to commit to creating a state park within 25 miles of every resident.

Let me also say a special thanks to Richard Louv – for bringing the nature deficit issue to the fore in a very effective and eloquent way. Rich has been working to advance our understanding of this threat including developing the Children and Nature Network to help advance the field.

I was recently on a flight from Washington DC to San Francisco. Sitting next to me in the left window seat was an obese boy who was about ten-years old. His mom put him on the plane to visit his dad in California. As soon as our plane was over ten thousand feet, the boy broke out his gameboy and settled in for a long and intense session. After a couple of hours of this, our pilot came on the intercom and said, “folks, off to our left is one of the best views you will ever see of the Grand Canyon.” I watched the boy. His eyes never left the game boy, not even for a second. I was saddened by this boy who had no apparent interest in the wonders of nature.

It occurred to me that I was witnessing first hand, an important American phenomenon that is having a profound impact on our children’s future and the future of nature itself. What is happening to our connection to nature and where has outdoor time gone? There are many signs that something major – something profoundly different -- is happening to the basic connection between Americans and the outdoors. The signs are everywhere:

- In 2005 the Association for Childhood Education International reported that children’s outdoor time is down by 50% over previous generations.
- A study published in *Early Childhood* in 2004 found that 85% of mothers reported that their children play outdoors less than they did as children.
- In 2004 the Kaiser Family Foundation estimated that the average child now spends over 6 hours daily watching TV, playing video games or on a computer.

- But it is too easy to just blame modern electronic technology for the change. There are other factors too. Many parents today are bombarded with media reports of “stranger danger” even though such crime is actually down by about 40% over previous generations. Many people say there is a lack of access to safe outdoor spaces. Others mention rising fuel prices particularly with regard to outdoor vacations.
- Despite the trend, 93% of mothers report that they recognize the significant benefits of children spending more time outdoors for health and motor skill development reasons. Some 77% agreed that it improved childhood social skills and 82% saw outdoor play as a way to improve a child’s sense of self worth.

Years ago, kids burned plenty of calories playing outdoors. A study in the Journal of Pediatrics, “Physical Activity Recommendations for School-Age Youth” found that “our children are just not burning up those calories today.”

Thinking about the boy I sat next to on the flight in comparison to my own youth. My mother would often say that I lived outdoors and I suspect many of you spent a great deal of your childhood free time in outdoors too. My brothers and I roamed for hours across the hills of northern Allegheny County, climbing trees, building forts in and dams in the creeks.

The Centers for Disease control notes that the missing ingredient for most kids is an hour per day of unstructured activity. Researchers in such places as Chicago and Boston are studying how the nationwide childhood obesity epidemic may cause shorter life-spans for the next generation. They conclude that, while we have enjoyed increases in expected lifespan for several decades, the new lack of childhood activity and its extra pounds can lead to adult-onset diabetes and can actually shorten average lifespan from three to five years.

Parents have become unnecessarily more fearful when outdoor “stranger danger” is nothing compared to indoor threats. The risk of kidnapping by a stranger is one to two changes in a million. And most sexual assaults on children are from adults they already know. And yet, the risk of a child communicating with a sexual predator on-line is one in five. Concern about on-line danger is real and is supported by a 2005 *Seventeen Magazine* study of online teenage girls that found:

- Twelve percent have agreed to meet in person with someone they have met only online.
- Twenty-three percent have sent pictures to someone that they have met on the Internet. And according to recent findings, this is probably understated because kids are now afraid to tell their parents when they have some suspicious person contacts them online because they don't want their computer time taken away.

The reality of the world we live in today is that children are more at risk of predation by strangers they meet in a chat room than by strangers in a park. Spending so much time in the screen space rather than in the green space isn't something we should encourage. In fact, our moms were right. Being outside is healthier for a whole host of reasons.

The “disconnect with nature” is not confined to children; we are seeing changes in adult outdoor behavior as well:

- Roper reports that in 2001 a decades-long pattern of increasing outdoor recreation participation in the U.S. shifted dramatically downward.
- Of the 27 outdoor activities the survey has been tracking for the American Recreation Coalition, 21 displayed a reduction while just six showed an increase.
- The National Park Service and many state parks departments report that attendance is down some 20 percent over the past ten years.

- Importantly, the Roper surveys show that the drop in participation is particularly noteworthy among young adults (19% to 24% less outdoor activity) – this is also the group that reports high levels of access to the Internet.
- Ironically, The Roper report documents convincingly that Americans of all ages see the importance of increased outdoor time.

You might be asking, soooo? Why does it matter to society whether or not our kids go outside? As a conservationist, I am concerned that there is an important link between being outdoors and caring for nature. Children who fish, camp and spend time in the wild before age 11 are much more likely to grow up to be environmentally-minded and committed as adults according to Cornell researchers. Their study indicates that participating in wild nature activities before age 11 is a “particularly potent pathway toward shaping both environmental attitudes and behaviors in adulthood,”

When the Kaiser Family Foundation research showed kids are now spending six hours or more hours a day in front of a screen, we all should be worried about that. Let me suggest that the unprecedented threat from global warming has been far too long ignored by indoor people who spend their time in front of a TV or computer isolated in an air-conditioned space.

I worry that we will not address global warming... until it interferes with our television reception.

The media makes matters worse by giving us information and entertainment they think we want-not what we may need. They fail to cover what’s happening to the outside world because they have concluded we are not that interested in the natural world and what is happening to it.

As an example, when a team of scientists from the University of Alaska at Fairbanks published an alarming report indicating that methane is leaking from the vast stores

frozen under the Siberian tundra at five times the rate that earlier scientists had found suggesting that the planet is hitting a tipping point where human-caused warming is forcing nature to give up methane which is 20-30 times more potent a heat-trapping gas than CO<sub>2</sub>. Scientists also estimate that there may be 70-80 billion tons under Siberia waiting to escape.

This alarming study was published and released to the public last September. The media didn't cover the story. They were too busy covering Jon Bonnet's supposed killer. There were 42 "satellite trucks and camera crews in front of the Boulder, Colorado DA's office that same day.

Last summer, the boreal forest in Russia suffered from multiple fires that consumed about 29 million acres. If Pennsylvania burned last summer, it may have made news but because it was in Russia, our media concluded that we do not care and never covered it.

Recently, the IPCC released the first section of their 4<sup>th</sup> report concluding that human-made pollution is heating the planet and warning of many dangers ahead. The television media has given little time to the matter again, they were fixated on the body of Anna Nicole Smith for weeks. It's sad that we give more attention to a dead woman than we to the future of nature.

National Wildlife Federation has polled hunters and anglers all across America. These polls demonstrate a much higher recognition of the threat of global warming on their local world than does the public at large. So being out there matters on our attitudes and understandings...

### **What Must Be Done**

At the National Wildlife Federation, we are asking partner organizations to join us in several key efforts.

1. More research and information

The emerging nature deficit issue is complex and requires significant understanding, verification, and problem solving. And we need to find creative ways to bring this urgent warning to parents who are only getting their messages from the televisions.

## 2. Immediate Help for Parents and Caregivers

At the National Wildlife Federation we are supporting a nationwide “Green Hour” program aimed at encouraging parents to commit to outdoor play for their children an average of one hour per day. See our website: [www.GreenHour.org](http://www.GreenHour.org).

We also have worked with volunteers to create 70,000 backyard-wildlife habitats, schoolyard habitats and community habitats across America where kids can connect with the nature in their back yard.

Richard Louv’s writing on the subject has gone a long way to wake America up to the problem. We now we need to address Green Hour Programs and discover other ways to encourage parents.

Pennsylvania can be the leader in developing a comprehensive “Leave No Child Indoors” Policy.

Let me call on you to encourage the Commonwealth to adopt comprehensive “Leave No Child Left Inside” policies to get more kids outside.

Most importantly, we need to be advocates for a societal-scale approach to addressing nature deficit in America. NWF and it affiliates are joining with partners across the nation to ask states to adopt comprehensive Leave No Child Indoors policy programs that include such elements as:

- State and local park program funding must be increased to increase priorities for getting more kids into outdoor and nature programs in parks.
- Bring Back Outdoor Recess to Our Schools-- The National Association for the Education of Young Children and others are concerned that recess time is being eliminated from elementary schools in school districts nationwide due to a perception it is a waste of time, takes away from academics, and portends physical injuries for children. States need to bring back recess and make it a part of a daily school-based Green Hour program.
- Greener schools and school grounds – states need to focus more on the new design and retrofitting of schools that help connect children with nature. The NWF schoolyard habitat program is one example of a way to do this along with tree planting and other ways to convert school grounds places of nature contact.
- Day Care – responsible state agencies need to review how effectively day-care centers are providing daily outdoor time for young children.
- TV guidelines – state public health agencies need to be clearer about supporting guidelines that encourage less television and more outdoor time. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends much more restricted viewing of TV by children. Their guidelines should be shared widely.
- A Greener Check Up – State Health and Natural Resource Departments can follow the lead of the American Academy of Pediatrics and ask doctors to recommend regular outdoor time as part of wellness check for children.

Everyone in the audience today can participate in NWF’s upcoming “Great American Backyard Campout” on June 23<sup>rd</sup> and take some children with you. Sleeping outdoors can be an inspiring experience and can spawn a greater love of nature. We are also encouraging parents to camp out with their kids. To sign up for the Great American Campout June 23<sup>rd</sup> go to [www.nwf.org](http://www.nwf.org)

Out of the window of my home office, I look over Pine Creek valley where nine decades ago, Rachael Carson and her mother often roamed looking for spring flowers. I can’t



help but believe that those hours “a field” in western Pennsylvania had a profound influence on this great conservationist and fostered her deep “Sense of Wonder.”

Edward O. Wilson wrote in *The Diversity of Life*,

"Wilderness settles peace on the soul because it needs no help; it is beyond human contrivance. Wilderness is a metaphor of unlimited opportunity... We do not understand ourselves yet and descend farther from heaven's air if we forget how much the natural world means to us. Signals abound that the loss of life's diversity endangers not just the body but the spirit. If that much is true, the changes occurring now will visit harm on all generations to come."

The often spicy and challenging political commentators, The Dixie Chicks convey the same message this way in the verses of their widely popular song, “Cowboy Take me Away.”

“I said I want to touch the earth, I want to break it in my hands.

I want to grow something wild and unruly...

I want to sleep on hard ground; in the comfort of your arms;

I want a pillow of blue bonnets and a blanket of stars;

Oh it sounds good to me...”

Doesn't that sound good to you too? Kids need to be outside more for their own physical, emotional and mental well-being. We all need to be reconnected to nature for the renewal of our minds and for the future of conservation. Gone are the days when the majority of kids spent hours at a time in the full flush of nature – in unstructured play exploring the hidden wonders under every rock and around every tree. Gone too are the

days when kids sleep under a blanket of stars. What will become of wild places, if our children like the boy on my plane know little of the mystery, the grace, the interconnectedness of all living things? We only save what we love and we only love what we know.

Let me share a closing thought, spending time in nature gives us a more vivid multi-sensory experience as we absorb inputs through our ears, through our eyes, through our nose and through our fingers. Our memories are made the richer and more durable by the multiple stimuli around us. We literally absorb the place as it absorbs us.

As a child, I spent many hours a field with my father who was a dog trainer and hunter. My father died more than thirty years ago; yet when I go to the woods and smell a familiar plant or hear a distant crow on a crisp fall morning, my memories of being with dad out in nature come flooding back in rich detail as if it were yesterday. In those moments I can hear his voice clearly and I can see his ruddy face in the golden light of an early morning sun. I cherish those fleeting memories.

I would urge every parent in this room to make memories in nature with your children. They will scarcely remember watching television with you, but they will hold on to the times they spent in the wild with you for a lifetime.

Thanks.