

Children and Nature - A Natural Issue for Florida

By Kathy Baughman McLeod

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The primaries are over and candidates are spending more time talking about specifics. One emerging issue is felt in every neighborhood, but until now has not had a name: "nature deficit disorder."

If you have difficulty answering these questions, you know this issue already:

- Where do Tampa's children play outside, in a natural, unmanicured setting?
- Where can Tampa's children build a tree house or a fort like you did when you were a kid?
- In what time slot can a child lie on the grass and watch the clouds float by?

Richard Louv, author of the red-hot book Last Child in the Woods – Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder (now in its tenth printing), coined the phrase "nature deficit disorder." He describes how today's kids are increasingly disconnected from the natural world and links children's increased time indoors, watching TV and playing video games, to conditions like attention disorders, childhood depression and obesity. It also highlights research that shows the power of time spent in nature to decrease symptoms of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and increase test scores.

Louv receives an average of 400 speaking invitations nationally per week -- and more from Florida than any other state. He has been in Florida six times since late 2005, including a keynote at incoming Senate President Ken Pruitt's statewide Environmental Summit in June and an address to 800 at the Florida Recreation and Park Association conference. He will next appear in Florida at the Sarasota Reading Festival in early November.

Among those who have joined this movement are leaders in education, health care, urban planning, parks and conservation -- Floridians like Fran Mainella, National Parks Service Director; Jackie Ogden of Disney, Babcock Ranch consultant Dr. William Hammond of Florida Gulf Coast University, and the Conservation Fund's Beth Dowdle.

"... One of my theories about Florida is the proximity and drama of its natural bounty," Louv says. "Alligators concentrate the attention. While Florida has been weighed down by enormous population increases, many of these people came to Florida because of the natural beauty — some of them hoping to offer to their children what they were missing in their former states."

Barriers to Children and Nature

Many of the barriers that prevent kids from spending unstructured time outside are easily understood - modern life is busy, scheduled and more compressed than ever. Add traffic, two and three-income families, fear of strangers and crime, health risks like West Nile, the pull of indoor entertainment and even legal barriers like neighborhood covenants – and it's not surprising that our children's range of roaming and wandering is estimated at one-ninth what ours was. We have the ability to buy free-range chickens; what happened to free-range kids?

All this time inside is linked to attention disorders like ADHD, childhood depression and more overweight and obese kids. And looking further down the road, if our kids don't experience nature – see it, smell it and touch it – who can we count on to protect our most basic life needs, clean air and water?

The power of nature is, to use just the right word – awesome. When children spend time in nature, their attention disorder symptoms decrease and standardized test scores show marked improvement. Even a view of nature from the classroom is beneficial.

Solutions

Florida is exceptionally well-positioned to address nature deficit disorder.

We have the largest conservation land-buying program in the nation, Florida Forever, which has protected millions of acres in past years. We also have an award-winning state park system, and many, many convenient and well-managed local parks and nature centers all across the state. It is time to grow Florida Forever substantially, perhaps to \$1 billion annually as recommended by the Florida Forever Coalition this week.

Locally, a network has been formed of environmental education programs called Tampa Bay Guide to Environmental Education Resources (www.earthforce.org/suncoast/geer/), as well as the Southwest Florida Council on Environmental Education, a group put together by business interests to support and expand environmental education. These networks need to be widely known and utilized to optimize their effectiveness.

It is not the existence of nature close-at-hand that alone blocks our kids from playing outside. Policies must be implemented to break down existing social and structural barriers. Many of these “built environment” barriers -- like traffic -- can be addressed through smart growth development and redevelopment strategies. Walk-to-school programs, and other pedestrian and transit based designs, are a likely first step.

There are great ideas from other parts of the country that Florida might explore.

Connecticut recently passed the “No Child Left Inside” Act, a program designed to reconnect youngsters with the outdoors, build the next generation of environmental stewards and showcase the state’s parks and forests. Perhaps Florida should explore a similar program?

The National Wildlife Federation promotes a program called the “Green Hour,” suggesting children should be in outside for an hour a day. They link outdoor, unstructured play to greater long term heart health. Let’s create a Florida-specific “Green Hour” using the wealth of natural areas and local parks all over the state.

As Louv wisely says, “Healing the broken bond between our young and nature is in everyone’s self-interest, not only because aesthetics or justice demand it, but also because our mental, physical and spiritual health depend upon it. This issue seems to have struck a chord in this country, and no more so than in Florida”.

So, during the remaining days of the campaign, ask any candidate, “What are you going to do to get Florida’s children outside?”

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Learn more about the national network of professionals and parents that has formed the Children and Nature Network or C&NN (www.cnaturenet.org). With Louv as its chairman, the network was created to encourage and support the people and organizations working to reconnect children with nature.