

## RECLAIMING THE OUTDOORS FOR OUR CHILDREN

Grant Linney

The Canadian wilderness has long been a part of our mental and cultural landscape. It was only a generation ago that most of us grew up playing outside, in local woodlots and fields, in patches of untended nature that engaged our senses and curiosity for countless hours. In short, we used to be much more aware of our intimate connections to the outdoors and its natural systems.

Now our society has also turned indoors and inwards, as we spend more and more time in darkened rooms staring at electronic screens and monitors. We are entranced by the lure of television, the Internet, video games, iPods, cell phones and Blackberries.

For a variety of reasons, we have also become increasingly fearful of outdoor landscapes that were once such a formative part of the Canadian psyche. We are told about diseases we can contract, be West Nile Virus, Avian Flu, or Lyme Disease.

We are increasingly confronted with what American author Richard Louv refers to as *the criminalization of natural play*. This is exemplified by the proliferation of No Trespassing signs as well as new regulations and procedures and liability waivers for all manner of outdoor activities.

Finally, our modern media's headline coverage of isolated instances of pedophilia and other *stranger dangers* make parents constantly fearful of allowing their children to play or to travel outdoors unaccompanied. No doubt, the allegation that the eleven recently accused terrorists in the Toronto area were trained in outdoor camps does not help the image of natural settings either.

But people are also starting to realize that there is a cost to such loss of contact with natural settings. In his recent book *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv coins the startling term "nature-deficit disorder." He describes it as resulting in widespread human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and high rates of physical and emotional illness.

The first step in correcting this estrangement is to recognize it. But, with equal urgency, we also need to realize and enact solutions. Letting go of our multiple and magnified fears will permit us to allow - and even encourage - our children to reclaim outdoor play as a natural part of growing up. Parents need to be with them, to spend time outdoors with their kids, modeling the curiosity and connection that they once hopefully had. However, even these steps are not good enough.

Just as we expect trained educators in our school systems to develop requisite language and numeric literacy, so too do we need to entrust them to develop the ecological literacy needed a healthy and sustainable future. A large portion of this literacy must come about through the provision of safe and educational experiences in outdoor settings.

First, these experiences need to activate a child's natural curiosity and sense of wonder for her natural surroundings. Such experiences will provide the motivation to become advocates for the life support systems of this planet.

Second, they should provide compelling encounters with the intricacies and complexities of natural systems. Such encounters will greatly stimulate a student's critical thinking skills as well as their knowledge of the intricacies and interrelationships of ecosystems.

Finally, these experiences will enable a child to see himself within the context of these life support systems, to examine and celebrate his natural surroundings from the multiple perspectives of a scientist and a geographer, an artist and a poet.

If, as polls suggest, Canadians consider the natural environment to a priority concern for the healthy and sustainable future of our children, we have to realize that they will not become its advocates and stewards through indoor lessons and electronic media alone.

We must bring them into the experiential midst of it. We must engage their senses through repeated and informed direct contact before they can become the ecologically literate citizens that our planet so desperately needs.

*Grant Linney teaches at the Upper Canada College Norval Outdoor School and is past president of The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario. This article first appeared in the Op-Ed section of The Globe and Mail on September 5, 2006.*