Un-natural children

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As the 21st century unfolds we find ourselves on the leading edge of a new phenomenon: the un-natural child. We have become an indoors civilization that is dangerous not only for our individual health but for society. An indoor culture deepens the illusion that we are separate from nature at a time when we desperately need to be more aware and respectful of nature's needs to avoid environmental calamity.

The un-natural child is the product of several well-known forces. The hyper- stimulating nature of electronic devices can hold an almost hypnotic sway over a child engrossed in a game. It has corrupted play, so that kids kick soccer balls that are digital and ski without touching real snow through the venue of an electronic flat screen. Interaction with other kids is often via games played over the Internet with anonymous others. And too many are hyper-coddled by parents who want to put figurative padding around the outside world. Even in mountainous Banff, the morning school bell is preceded by an armada of SUVs as kids are dropped off at the gate.

The data back up the anecdotal evidence. One study used by Parks Canada indicated that children in Canada spend eight hours a day in front of a screen and only three hours a week outside, with only a fraction of that in unstructured play.

The decline in outdoor play has consequences beyond the physical and mental health of the next generation. Escaping into virtual reality affects our conceptions of the natural world. We are biological beings on a biological planet, and our children need to become much more in tune with nature, not tune it out.

This condition has been called a "nature deficit disorder." And curing it requires more than simply pushing our kids onto a soccer field or into a gym. It means finding ways for them to engage with the natural world so they appreciate what it is we must save.

Richard Louv coined the phrase "nature deficit disorder" in his widely read 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder.* Admitting up front that it was a descriptive, not a scientific, label for what he had observed, Louv chronicled the rise in medications like Ritalin prescribed for children to help them pay attention in school. A rambunctious child is now seen as a problem child. Instead of sending him outside to play to burn off the excess energy, we tranquilize him so he will conform. Creativity is lost when the mind is numbed.

An increasing body of research is showing the benefits of children spending time outside in non-man- made environments. Nature is spontaneous, not programmed. One cannot figure out the level of the game and move on to the next because nature is dynamic and ever-changing. The more one understands nature, the more fascinating and mysterious it becomes.

Ruth Ann Atchley and her colleagues showed how time spent in nature restores the creative function of human brains marinated in technology. In their 2012 study *Creativity in the Wild: Improving Creative Reasoning through Immersion in Natural Settings,* they showed how taking a break from technology — by undertaking four days of hiking without electronics — can restore creativity. The hyperstimulation of a technological society tires out the executive functions of the brain, they note, but exposure to nature restores it because "natural environments are associated with a gentle, soft fascination, allowing the executive attentional system to replenish." The adults they immersed in nature improved their complex cognitive functions, such as creative problem solving.

Restoring the connection between children and nature will require conscious action, but some interesting models offer a guide. Louv's work inspired the creation of the Children and Nature Alliance of Canada, whose aim is to get kids outside to play. It has collaborated with Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society British Columbia, Mountain Equipment Co-op and BC Parks to create Get Outside BC, which seeks to train youth leaders from across the province to go back to their communities and get their peers enjoying the outdoors.

One of the world's most interesting innovations is the recently created Rouge Urban National Park in Toronto. Alan Latourelle, CEO of Parks Canada, sees bringing nature to the city as a gateway to the national park system. Urban national parks will encourage parents to be less afraid to let their kids run free, he believes. And Parks Canada has developed Operation Unplugged (mantra: "Unplug, Go Out, Explore"), a challenge to re-engage with the outdoors. The introductory video shows a sobering vignette in which we check the weather by going online rather than going outside.

Other cities are promoting wilderness inside city limits. At WILD 10, the 10th World Wilderness Congress, held in Spain, a Wild Cities collaboration was launched to bring the benefits of nature to urban dwellers (such actions have double benefit, as species at risk of extinction tend to be concentrated near urban areas). And the need to devote resources to getting kids out in nature will be a major focus of the World Parks Congress in Sydney, Australia, in November 2014.

These encouraging efforts to address the un-natural child phenomenon come none too soon. The most profound concern is that our growing estrangement from nature is self-destructive, not only at the scale of the un-natural child but at the scale of human civilization. We are already changing the climate and the chemical balance of the earth as well as rapidly destroying many of the other life forms that share the planet with us. To reverse this trend before it's too late, we need to understand what it is we need to protect. We need to get out in nature more. ■

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Flathead Valley.
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