

CONSERVATION

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Outdoor play is critical to the future of land and resource conservation.

SAN JOAQUIN RIVER PARKWAY AND CONSERVATION TRUST. © SHARON WEAVER

This Issue

The Seriousness of Play

The Importance of Outdoor Play to the Future of Conservation

Land trusts and public agencies often talk about the value of nature experiences to children. It turns out that outdoor play is where the real attention and action is needed—action that will benefit not only children and families, but the future of conservation.

Volunteers and staff of a land trust or public agency generally love the outdoors — hiking, biking, fishing, bird-watching, camping — and get out on weekends, warm summer evenings, and whenever the opportunity arises.

Adults who have fallen in love with nature, the woods, the hills, streams, and rivers—everything outdoors—can

likely trace that love back to their childhood. They probably played outside during the summer riding bikes, playing ball or making up games at the park. They may have gone to summer camp, where they hiked, backpacked, and played outdoors for weeks on end.

Our children's relationship to the outdoors is very different today.



Making time for outdoor, unstructured play is essential to children and families.

They are losing their connection to nature, spending more time online and indoors, rather than offline and outside. In addition, many parents are afraid of letting their children explore the outdoors, afraid to let them wander off, unsupervised and on their own. This fear is passed along to their youngsters. Even when children are allowed time outdoors, it is most often for structured or organized activities such as soccer. While sports can be beneficial, the importance of unstructured play—a time when kids are free to create their own activities—can't be underestimated.

This disconnect is proving to be bad for our children, and ultimately it could be bad for conservation. What will happen to land conservation efforts if future generations don't know what it's like to see an animal in the wild, jump, swing or slide at the park, sit in a tree, or explore a cool, clear stream? Will they fight to save that which they have never experienced firsthand?

What Keeps Kids Away from Nature?

Numerous recent studies* indicate that children and teens are turning away from outdoor activities at an alarming rate. This trend coincides with a steady decline over the last several generations in the number of places where children can play. As a result, many children are deprived of easily accessible parks, fields, streams, and other open spaces—an outdoor world that was readily available to their parents and grandparents.

Why aren't more children out enjoying nature? Their answers may surprise you. The number one reason cited by children and teens—including nearly a quarter of children ages 6–12—for not getting outdoors is a lack of time. Over twenty percent of 6–12 year-olds cited too much school work as their top reason for not getting outdoors.

These are disturbing figures, representing almost half of all students in first through seventh grades, who either do not have, or feel that they do not have, enough time to put aside their cares—or their gadgets—to go outside and play. Perhaps more disturbing is that a full thirty-nine percent of 6–12 year-olds and fifty-four percent of 13–17 year-olds cite a lack of interest as the top reason for not getting out into nature. Perhaps it is no coincidence that today less than half of Americans aged six and up participate in outdoor recreation on a regular basis.

But do children really lack the time to play outdoors when the average child spends up to five hours a day in front of a TV, computer, or other electronic screen? In just a few generations, America has made a dramatic shift from a primarily rural, agricultural country to a predominately urban and suburban nation. This transformation has changed our relationship with the land, and as a result, the priorities

What is Unstructured Play?



Unstructured play is created by children on their own, without adult guidance or instruction. Unstructured play is open-ended and has no specific educational purpose. It is becoming harder and harder to find unstructured play opportunities for children, but it isn't impossible. Even on a guided hike or field trip, children can be given time to explore, play or observe on their own without parental or adult interference. Setting aside 15 minutes on a hike or taking children to the park to let them experience the outdoors in their own way can have lasting benefits.

of our children have changed as well. Most kids simply don't grow up with open space right outside their doors anymore. And with electronic diversions readily available to them, there has been a direct impact on the recreational choices that children make.

Reaping the Rewards of Outdoor Play

Play is critical to children's development. Numerous studies document the positive effects of play in their lives. Children who play outdoors are healthier, do better in school, have better social skills, better self-image and lead more fulfilling lives.

Through outdoor play, children can learn new skills, while developing and testing their imagination and creativity. Play is their work.

The rewards for making the time to venture outside are great. Parents and other adult family members who take their children outdoors on a regular basis have the opportunity to share their kids' sense of wonder and fun as they hike new trails or run around at the park. Many say their children seem more at peace with themselves and the world when they are outside. And grown-ups themselves benefit by tapping into that same sense of wonder and getting some fresh air and exercise along the way.

How Lack of Outdoor Play Hurts

The decrease in outdoor play has many ramifications, including impacts on childhood physical and mental health. Childhood obesity has increased dramatically since the 1960s and now affects twenty-five percent of all school-aged children. The number of children with vitamin D deficiencies has increased dramatically too, with some seventy percent



Play is work for children; it helps them develop a variety of important skills.

of children suffering from some type of vitamin D deficiency. (Vitamin D is primarily absorbed through exposure to sunlight.) And today's youth spend an average of only thirty minutes a week, just over 4 minutes a day on average, in unstructured play. This is the kind of play that psychologists tell us youngsters need in order to develop executive thinking (the ability to control emotions and behavior).

Adequate access to the outdoors can affect stress levels as well. Stud-

ies have shown that living near (or even driving by) parks and other green spaces, reduces stress. And a 2001 study in the Netherlands showed that people living near green spaces reported fewer mental and physical complaints than their more urban neighbors.

In his ground-breaking book, *Last Child in the Woods*, author Richard Louv describes the indoors and on-screen world most children live in as filled with infinite data that is instantly

accessible, but which leaves children (and adults) over-saturated with information. In a world where “that which cannot be Googled doesn’t count,” children are missing out on learning what things in nature feel like, smell like, or even look like. Louv argues that even though children have virtually unlimited access to facts and data, they can only gain wisdom and retain a sense of wonder about life by developing their senses in the outdoors.

While a direct correlation cannot be proven between any of these problems and the decrease in outdoor activity, we do know that children and adults who include ample outdoor activity in their lives tend to engage in more activities across the board and have fewer health complaints. Children who spend time outdoors have been shown to exercise, study outside of class, and work more than their counterparts who stay indoors—in effect, leading fuller lives.

Will future voters who have not developed a connection to or an affinity for the natural world be willing to support and protect it?

In its effort to encourage more outdoor play and recreation, The California Round Table on Recreation, Parks and Tourism developed and adopted the California Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights. It’s a checklist of experiences every child should have by the age of 14. These are experiences that used to be taken for granted, but are now sadly lacking from too many childhood experiences. The bill of

Field Notes from a Teacher

by Kelly Velasco, Program Manager, CCLT

As a classroom teacher and Education Director for a nonprofit land trust, I have spent many years around children in various settings. I incorporated unstructured time outdoors into all of my field trips with school-age children. What I discovered was fascinating and even a bit hopeful—that given time outdoors without any requirements, end products, to-do lists, or agendas, children begin to create their own learning experiences equal to or better than any curriculum I have ever seen.

School is increasingly regimented and time for play—any type of play—is diminishing. There just isn’t enough time to allow kids the freedom to explore without requirements. Initially, my students were confused when I turned them loose around a pond with a bucket of dip nets, an empty aquarium, and no instructions. Even the teacher and parents were a bit nervous! They would all wait patiently for me to tell them exactly what to do. When I explained that this was their time to do whatever they wanted, they were hesitant. However, without fail, at least one student would see something that caught his or her eye and run off to explore. The others always followed suit, and soon, everyone was engaged in something without any prompting from adults. Some would try to catch guppies, some would simply squish pond mud through their fingers. A few kids would discover a nest with hatched eggs in the tall grass and start to develop theories on where the ducklings ended up.

During some of my field trips, we would simply allow our students the freedom to get dirty in pursuit of their interest outdoors. On one particular occasion, a very prim group of fourth grade girls were in hot pursuit of a Pacific tree frog. They were so focused on chasing it, that they found themselves knee deep in swamp mud. I could see the annoyed looks on the faces of the chaperones as they imagined the future cleanup in store. My field trip team and I quickly communicated the excitement and pride we felt as we watched these budding biologists tenaciously track a creature. The chaperones’ faces changed after that exchange and they slowly began to follow our lead. For the rest of the day, they too enjoyed watching students explore and discover nature, even if it meant muddy shoes or stained knees.

Some of my best field trips were the result of allowing children to freely explore outdoors. When given time and space, they were focused on what interested them, using problem-solving skills, increasing self-awareness, and practicing flexibility. Isn’t that what we want kids to do?



rights (www.calroundtable.org) says children should have the opportunity to play in a safe place, explore nature, learn to swim, go fishing, follow a trail, camp under the stars, ride a bike, go boating, connect with the past, and plant a seed.

Families Shape Play

How can we ensure children develop and retain a connection to the land? How can we make the outdoors a bigger part of their lives? The answer depends primarily on parents. Parental lifestyle is the main determining factor for how children live, particularly younger children. Fully three-quarters of preteen children and sixty-four percent of teenagers identified their parents as the most influential factor in their deciding to take part in outdoor activities. Other adult family members can have a big influence as well, helping kids discover the joy, adventure, and just plain fun of outdoor play. In fact, in surveys, kids aged 6–12 cite “fun” as their main reason for going outdoors, listing bicycling, fishing, camping, running, and hiking as their most popular outdoor pursuits.

These are easily accessible activities for most adults, even though busy schedules and the ever-increasing demands of work may make it a challenge to pursue them. In many families both parents have jobs, which can further complicate finding the time and energy to plan a hike, camping trip, or even a couple of hours at the park.

The Impact on Conservation

There are many reasons to increase children’s participation in outdoor activities. It’s not only important to their physical and mental health, but in the long run, it may also ensure the future of conservation itself. Two areas may be impacted in particular:

public support for land protection, and conservation leadership.

Impact on land protection

It costs money and public support to protect the land. Over the last several decades, Americans have stepped up to foot the bill, overwhelmingly passing local conservation measures (essentially a self-imposed tax) to ensure that natural places are protected. In late 2008, at the start of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, more than 70 percent of conservation ballot initiatives passed.

In 2010, more than 81 percent passed. Will future voters who have not developed a connection to or an affinity for the natural world be willing to support and protect it? The answer could have a big impact on the future of our nation’s land and water resources and working farms and ranches.

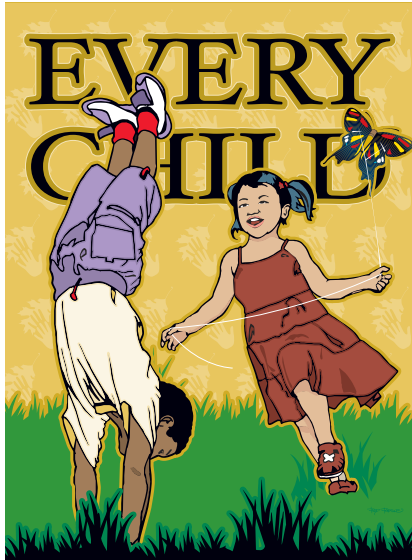
Impact on conservation leadership

Throughout the 20th century, conservation leaders and fish and wildlife managers typically came from rural backgrounds, or were raised with



Parents have the largest impact on how children live—and adults can help encourage more outdoor play for the children in their lives.

hunting and fishing as an integral part of their lives. The experiences they gained through outdoor activity influenced the way they carried out their work, and their understanding of the outdoors shaped their conserva-



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calroundtable.org

tion and natural resource management decisions. With far fewer young people growing up with a connection to the outdoors, how will conservation leadership be impacted? Will students be drawn to wildlife conservation as a career option? And if they are, how will their lack of practical experience on the land affect how our natural resources are managed?

How can the land trust community help?

There are many resources available for land trusts who want to help promote outdoor play for children. Land trusts have connections to acres and acres of protected land, which is ideal for outdoor activities, both structured and unstructured, for children. Even if a land trust lacks the staff or expertise to create a formal outdoor education or youth program, there are plenty of opportunities to partner with organizations and individuals who can help.

Land trusts can:

- Adopt a goal to find ways to help youth in their community check off every item on the California Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights;
- Reproduce the California Children's

Outdoor Bill of Rights in newsletters and communications;

- Partner with local youth groups to offer camping, hiking or other play-related activities on protected land;
- Invite youth groups to plant trees or hedgerows on protected land;
- Buy land within walking distance of schools for outdoor activities associated with schools or other community partners;
- Contact local recreation/parks departments to find out about opportunities to partner or help coordinate activities;
- Contact local schools and offer to host field trips.

These activities promote more outdoor activity and play time for children, while demonstrating the value of conservation and protected lands to the community.

Whether you're an avid outdoor recreation enthusiast or just keep meaning to get outside more, take the time to explore the natural world with a child. It's an investment in them, in you, and ultimately, in the future of conservation.

LIST OF RESOURCES

www.calroundtable.org

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