

THE LITCHFIELD COUNTY TIMES

LCT

Forward to Nature

WRITTEN BY
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Richard Louv presents a startling picture in his massively influential book "Last Child in the Woods, Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder," first published in 2005:

"The shift in our relationship to the natural world is startling," he wrote, "even in settings that one would assume are devoted to nature. Not that long ago, summer camp was a place where you camped, hiked in the woods, learned about plants and animals or told firelight stories about ghosts or mountain lions. As likely as not today, 'summer camp' is a weight-loss camp or a computer camp. For a new generation, nature is more abstraction than reality. Increasingly, nature is something to watch, to consume, to wear — to ignore."

Mr. Louv's first book on the subject was an examination of the growing problem of "nature deficit disorder."

"Our society is teaching young people to avoid direct experience in nature," he wrote. "That lesson is delivered in schools, families, even organizations devoted to the outdoors and codified into the legal and regulatory structures of many of our communities. Our institutions, urban/suburban design and cultural attitudes unconsciously associate nature with doom — while disassociating the outdoors from joy and solitude."

In 2011, Mr. Louv extended his cautionary message to adults. Our society, he says, has developed such faith in technology that we have yet to realize or adequately study how human capacities are enhanced through the power of nature.

The author will travel East from his California home July 26 to present his findings to the Weantinog Heritage Trust, Connecticut's largest land trust, during its Midsummer Gala, to be held this year at 7 p.m. at the John Dorr Nature Laboratory at 121 Carmel Hill Road North in Washington.

"This is part of the 'book tour that never died,'" said Mr. Louv wryly during a telephone interview. "'Last Child' is now in its second edition, and 'The Nature Principal' came out in 2011. The Children in Nature Network was created along the way, and it has kind of taken over my life and the lives of a lot of people who have decided this is important."

Mr. Louv argues that as young people spend less and less time in natural surroundings, their senses narrow, physiologically and psychologically, and this reduces the richness of their human experience. "Being in nature has properties to it we don't understand," he explained. "We have measured people walking on treadmills and compared them to another group walking in nature. Even though they are burning same number of calories, and both are getting stronger and healthier, the people outdoors get even better. There is a margin of improvement we don't understand. Edward O. Wilson developed the biophilia hypothesis,



Richard Louv.

which suggests we are hardwired to have a relationship to nature.

"There is considerable evidence for that," he continued. "We talk about our five senses, but in fact we have as many as 40 senses. For instance, we have a much greater sense of smell than we think we do, but we spend most of the day trying to block out most of those senses in order to stare more intently at a screen. Shutting down our senses is being less alive."

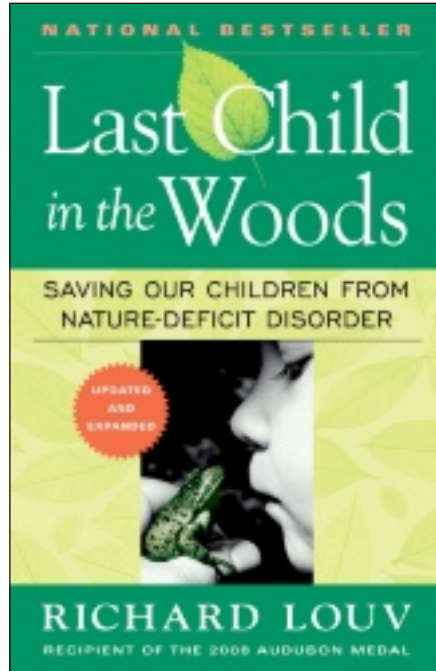
The move away from experiencing the outdoors has many sources, Mr. Louv said — some surprising. "In education in public schools, most administrators are trying to discourage kids from going outdoors," he said. "Some of it is liability [issues]; some of it is testing. Many have cut or eliminated recess and field trips — it all goes toward meeting test requirements. Attention deficit disorder is a big problem today, but what proportion of that huge increase in kids taking drugs for it is because they suffer from nature deficit disorder? They've cut back on recess so the kids don't go outside. Then they go home to protective house arrest and we wonder why we have an obesity problem and so many are on drugs."

Since his books burst upon the scene there has been an increasing awareness of the need to reconnect children (and adults) to nature. "There are people in power who take this quite seriously," he said, noting that in Connecticut "Leave No Child Inside" seeks to reverse the trend.

His attendance at the Weantinog gala signals another growing awareness: that if children are not raised to be interested in the natural world they will not seek to conserve it in the future.

"This year our focus is on getting children more connected with nature, on getting them outside," said Weantinog board member Lisa Mahar. "Richard is one of the leading experts on that. His position is that since the late 1980s children have stopped going outside."

Like many middle-aged persons, Ms. Mahar recalls a childhood in which she was ushered to the kitchen door by her mother and told to go outside. "We were outdoors all the time," she remembered. "Now kids sit in front of computers,



which prevents physical activity. It creates all kinds of behavior differences."

One of biggest benefits of time spent outside is that it increases creativity by open-ended play, she opines.

"Children become more active participants in their own entertainment," said Ms. Mahar, a mother of two young boys. "They become more observant, more creative, and see more opportunities for play. Part of it is that we have to encourage kids to go outside, but young parents who grew up in the last three decades haven't had those experiences and don't know how to model that for children."

To that end, Weantinog is increasing its emphasis on introducing young families to the natural world. "For land trusts, the people on the boards tend to have had these experiences," said Ms. Mahar. "The age of members is older because children have become disconnected. It's important to get children re-engaged."

"Land trusts have become increasingly interested in this issue," said Mr. Louv, "especially the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Lands. There is a growing awareness that it doesn't matter what a piece of paper says, it doesn't matter how often you say 'in perpetuity.' If in a number of decades people don't care about preservation, they will find a lawyer and change it. Land trusts have come to understand they have to be fully engaged in connecting people to land."

Ms. Mahar acknowledges the necessity of engaging younger people. "I am 48 and I am the youngest person on the Weantinog board," she said. "The age of residents in the Litchfield area tends to run higher; the community is older so some of it is just the demographics of area. We are trying to make a connection with young people. Part of it has to do with money — when you get into conservation, you are looking for donors who want to give you land and easements. To make an impact, you need money and we need people."

Weantinog is responding with an educational outreach. Catherine Rawson, the executive director of Weantinog,

said the board of directors has greatly increased its educational program in the past several years, bring in children from regional schools for scientific activities on its Cobble Brook Preserve in Kent.

"Diane Swanson, program director at the Pratt Center in New Milford, says she has seen recently that children go outside and do not know how to play, how to create games or just feel free and relaxed in the environment," said Ms. Rawson. "We want to provide as many possibilities as we can for families to do that on our properties. This can make parents feel comfortable with those hours and hours spent outside."

Each year Weantinog stages programs in which school children are encouraged to feel like scientists for the day, collecting and identifying small insects from the brook. Then they draw conclusions about the health of the river from the bugs they found. They also take part in stocking native brook trout in the river and learn about stream ecology and preserving native species.

Weantinog has also increased its guided hiking program and has done three collaborative sessions with the Pratt Center in New Milford on Mason Bees, a type of solitary native bees that are actually better pollinators than honeybees. Programs on bluebirds and kestrels introduce other species and families were invited to learn what they can do to preserve waterways.

"The vast majority of these days are free or have a very low fee to cover costs," Ms. Rawson said. "We are creating as many opportunities for families to experience the natural world as we can. We are providing educational opportunities at the same time they are getting the physical and mental benefits. We see it as an important part of our mission."

Mr. Louv said such efforts across the country are getting more and more people out into nature. "There are lots of examples of great programs that are popping up," he said. "Family nature clubs — multiple families that band together to take hikes — many of them have hundreds of families. A family nature club started three years ago that has 1,000 families. Rhode Island has a statewide nature club and developed an iPhone app to help members meet up for activities. These clubs do not depend on big-organization grants. There is a national network of teachers who are reaching out to each other — and it is not just environmental teachers. English teachers are getting kids out under trees to write poetry."

He said he never talks about getting back to nature. "I think in terms of going forward to nature. Biophilic cities can be immersed in nature," he said. "People receive all the benefits of having nature around. That can happen in the workplace, in school or at the dentist. Cities can be engines of biodiversity."

Those who want to learn more and contribute toward Weantinog's educational outreach may inquire about tickets, which begin at \$1,000, by calling 860-927-1927.

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