

directions



The journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators

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Extinction of Experience: A Challenge to Nature Centers?

(or, How do You Make a Conservationist?)

Presentation to the 9th Annual Summit of the
Association of Nature Center Administrators

by Ken Finch, August 2003

At the August 2003 ANCA Summit, past ANCA President Ken Finch energized a plenary session with his perspectives on the "extinction of experience" issue, as originally defined by author Robert Michael Pyle. Finch challenged the audience to consider the issue's implications for the nature center profession. Fellow past President Gordon Maupin then shared his thoughts about how nature centers might address extinction of experience through new approaches to urban land conservation.

The first portion of this Special Issue of Directions prints Finch's Summit address as it was delivered. The second section offers further thoughts and possible approaches to the issue from both Finch and Maupin.

Introduction:

How many of you climbed trees when you were a child? How many played in tree houses or club houses? Collected natural stuff like leaves, nuts, rocks, shells, and bugs? Liked to explore woods, meadows and prairies without staying on the trails?

How many of you recall those experiences as playing a significant role in the formation of your personal conservation ethic?

Now, how many of you allow those activities at your own nature center?

This talk is about human behavior, which is about as complex a subject as there is. There is no single, unified theory of human behavior, no magic bullet to help us easily understand it – so this discussion is only a very brief, simplified introduction. My goal is not to make prescriptions, but rather to share some important concepts and research that will, hopefully, start generating thoughts, questions and ideas among us.

The Problem Statement:

My starting premise is that we are failing. We – the environmental education (e.e.) and nature center professions – have not been successful at a societal level. Broadly speaking, the goal of e.e. is to create a society that lives in harmony with nature. No one believes that we are there, so our task is to transform societal values. We are in the business of social engineering, and we are failing.

For some of you, it may be a bit of a shock to hear e.e. referred to as social engineering. We've spent decades dodging any perception of a political agenda. The standard disclaimer, which I've personally uttered more times than I could ever remember, has been "We're teaching kids how to think about the

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...is one of the annual benefits of membership in the Association of Nature Center Administrators. Members also receive four regular issues of *Directions* annually, along with discounted registration fees for ANCA's annual Summit and other benefits (see Membership Form on page 17).

ANCA is a private, non-profit organization, dedicated to promoting and supporting best leadership and management practices for nature and environmental learning centers.

For more information on ANCA use our toll-free number: 1-800-490-ANCA (2622) or our website: www.natctr.org

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environment, not *what* to think." But the truth is that we do have an agenda, and we always have had an agenda. We want our work to influence society in a particular direction; we want to change the world. This is not really so unusual, nor is it something we should have to apologize for. Ultimately all public education is about social engineering: our culture values and prioritizes public education because we perceive it as having positive impacts on our society. Is e.e. really any different?

I joined this profession because I wanted to make a difference for the environment. I valued – and still value – immediate political action and the near-term results of efforts like land protection, but I always felt that the way to make a *lasting* difference was through education. To me, that's what e.e. has always been about. Today, the modern forms of e.e. are roughly a generation old. Environmental education started "booming" in the late '60s or early 70s; we can use the first Earth Day in 1970 as an approximate reference point. Millions of children have been exposed to e.e. since then. The 10th graders I taught at a residential learning center in 1974 are now in their 40s. The third graders you may have taught in 1995 will be able to vote in the next presidential election. According to my original theory of e.e., the world should now look different. But we've failed, thus far.

Even a quick review of our country's political climate will show that the environment's political clout is shrinking, not growing. At the national level, and in most states and localities, the environment is just not a priority. In fact, after rising in prominence and visibility during the 70s and early 80s, environmental concerns have been slipping backwards. Certainly the environment hasn't been a defining issue in recent national elections; it's hardly even been in play. We're now seeing

many of the bedrock pieces of national environmental policy under attack and, in some cases, actually being unraveled. Public opinion polls reflect this trend, as well. For years most polls showed that roughly 65–75% of Americans considered themselves environmentalists, while similar numbers would place ecological protection over job growth or would willingly pay more taxes if they knew the incremental funds were going to support the environment. But a recent poll (Roper, I believe) had the percentage of us who self-identify as environmentalists down to only 50%.

We have, of course, made tangible progress, but not as much as we may like to think. Those encouraging polls that we've quoted over the years have almost always used warm, fuzzy, open-ended questions, where it's easy to give the "right" answer. Really, how many people

"John Burroughs remarked that 'Knowledge without love will not stick. But if love comes first, knowledge is sure to follow.' Our problem is that we are trying to invoke knowledge, and responsibility, before we have allowed a loving relationship to flourish."

— David Sobel,
Ecophobia

would say, point blank, that they don't support the environment? We've made it politically correct to say you're an environmentalist – or at least to *not* admit it if you aren't. But those polls tell an incomplete story.

Last year I had a chance to talk directly with a professional pollster from the national firm MacWilliams, Robinson & Partners, which has been doing public opinion surveys for the Minnesota Environmental Partnership. I raised the question about too-easy, open-ended questions, and asked him if anyone had done similar polls with a closed-end approach, where the respondents had to actually choose priorities from among a limited number of options. That is, polls that mimic real life, where we don't have

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unlimited dollars to spend, or unlimited time to contribute, or unlimited votes to use (except, perhaps, in Chicago). His response has tremendous importance for our profession. He said yes, that had been done several times, with fairly consistent results. When forced to identify their priorities, several big issues consistently poll in the teens (i.e., percentages) or occasionally into the low 20s as people's priorities: health care, national security, the economy, education, social services. The environment? According to that pollster, only 1 or 2 percent name it as their priority.

This is not all that surprising. Which of us, if forced to choose, wouldn't opt to feed and house our families rather than buy more parkland? Yet in the professional arena that we have all chosen to play in – the arena of social engineering – the environment is going to need a lot more than just a 1 or 2% priority rating to get anywhere. The frustrating bottom line for the e.e. profession is this: 33 years after the first Earth Day, we still have not developed solid societal support for the environment. My organization, Audubon, talks of the commendable goal of creating a "culture of conservation" – a phrase that I particularly like. But the evidence is that, so far, we've been able to achieve no more than a *sub-culture* of conservation. And, lord help us, I fear that we may even be closer to a *counter* culture. This is not the path towards massive change in societal values.

The Challenges for Environmental Education

Earlier in this Summit you heard John Flicker argue that environmental education needs credibility – that it should be seen as an equal partner with environmental activism and land conservation. We all agree, of course, but we all know that isn't the case now. This spring I had a great, thoughtful discussion with Rip Rapson, who is Executive Director of the McKnight Foundation – one of the largest environmental funders in the Midwest.

He has a strong personal history of environmentalism and is clearly "one of us", yet he said, direct as could be, that e.e. hasn't had traction with most foundations for 10 or 15 years.

Also in this conference, we've heard e.e. supported, but with the corollary statement that "we can't wait" on the immediate political issues. True, of course; there are critical environmental problems that we have to address now. But too often this means that support for long-term solutions is sacrificed to the need to immediately plug holes in the

dangerous one. I remember the joy that friends and I felt in 1980 when Jimmy Carter signed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. We were sure that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was now protected for good. Yet today the Refuge has become an annual debate with razor-thin voting margins in Congress, and chances are that we will lose the vote one of these years. Turns out that the Arctic Refuge wasn't so secure, after all. Nor is Yellowstone so secure from gold mining on its borders. Nor are isolated wetlands any longer protected from rampant development.

The truth is, laws, policies, wilderness designations, and conservation easements will endure only as long as a majority of our society supports them. They can all be changed, and we're seeing that happen right now in Washington. If environmentalists can't create clear and overwhelming societal support for our agenda, then we run the risk that all our "here and now" work may ultimately be for naught. This balancing act between near-term and long-term environmentalism has been an underlying challenge for environmental education throughout all of our careers.

So why haven't we succeeded? Environmental education, as we now know it, is a child of the 60s. This was an era when math and

science were booming, as a panicked response to the first Sputnik launch in 1957. "The commies beat us into space!" was the public outcry, and the chosen antidote was a huge push on math and science in our public schools. Boomers by the millions grew up with an emphasis on left brain processes, where cognitive thinking was more important than affective values. It was also an era of huge social upheaval in the U.S., with civil rights, the Vietnam war, and environmentalism all generating massive public debate. And it was an age of abiding (though perhaps unspoken) public belief in the power of education to affect social change – no doubt at least in part a reflection of that cognitive emphasis of the Sputnik backlash. The best example, for those of us old enough to remember them, was "teach-ins".



"A face-to-face encounter with a banana slug means much more than a Komodo dragon seen on television."

— Robert Micheal Pyle,
The Thunder Tree

dike. To my aging eyes, it seems like we've been running around plugging those holes for decades. As soon as we fix one, two others pop open. What we really need to do is build a completely new dike. I find it ironic that so many powerful environmental organizations urge corporate America to start thinking long-term, over seven generations, instead of continuing to focus on their monthly financial reports and yearly stock results. Yet most of those same environmental organizations practice a nearly identical ethic, throwing virtually all their resources into near-term battles while only paying lip service to longer-term investments like education.

This immediate, "can't wait" approach to environmental problems may be a

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They were an alternative approach to more violent protests, and the folks leading them were sure – *really sure* – that teach-ins could create positive social change through the power of learning.

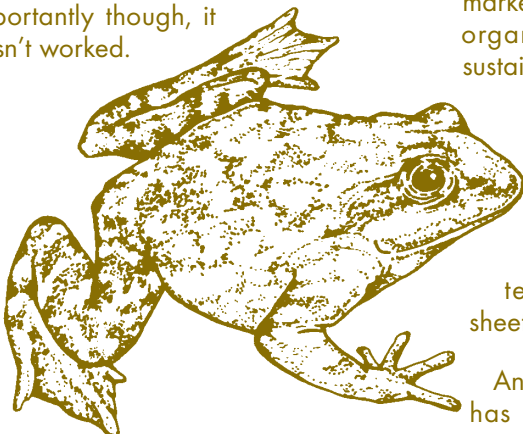
Today's environmental education is based on that same paradigm: that learning will create societal change. We all know the spectrum; it's been drilled into us: awareness to appreciation to knowledge to skills to action. One of the popular reflections of this approach is the Baba Dioum quote that I, for one, am thoroughly sick of hearing:

*"We will conserve only what we love.
We will love only what we understand.
We will understand only what
we are taught."*

Well, I'll buy the first part, that we will only conserve what we love. But we will love only what we understand? Since when? I love my cats, but I certainly don't understand them. I love thunderstorms, but I don't understand them either. And I love my wife....

As for part three – we will understand only what we are taught – I don't buy that either, at least not in the way that it is often used to justify formal environmental education. Are we willing to say that we are incapable of learning from our own actions and experiences, without any actual effort at being taught?

The paradigm behind this approach to e.e. can be summarized as, "If only they understood, they would come to care." Which is to say, if only they knew what we know, they would think and act like us. Pretty arrogant, actually. More importantly though, it hasn't worked.



We're a full generation into modern e.e., and American society is going in the wrong direction. For most of our organizations, the resultant cry has been that we need to do more, to reach more children, to develop more environmental literacy, to construct better facilities. But there simply isn't any research evidence that this paradigm of environmental education has worked, or ever will work.

What Research Tells Us

Many of us wonder why things haven't changed like we hoped, and we lament the lack of longitudinal research about e.e. that might help us answer that question. We know that no one has yet done the 20 or 25 year controlled studies that would prove – or perhaps disprove – that e.e. is an effective means towards changing adult values and influencing adult behavior. We grasp at what bits of anecdotal feedback we can find: how little Johnny's lifestyle choices were changed by his summer camp experience at our nature center, or how little Jenny now writes from her State Senate office about what a powerful experience she had in her 5th grade e.e. class. We need these anecdotes to keep us going, to keep up our belief and our commitment. They are true, they are powerful, and there are many of them. But not nearly enough. Changing societal values will take far more than anecdotal impacts.

And we proudly tout our impressive operational statistics to major donors and foundation funders. You know, how much our nature center's attendance has grown, how many dedicated volunteers we have, and how highly teachers rate our programs on their evaluation sheets. But none of these are proven predictors of adult behavior. In reality, they are marketing measures – very important for organizational health and fiscal sustainability, but they don't say much about real impact. We have to remember not to confuse customer satisfaction surveys with meaningful change. I read one researcher who referred to those post-program teacher evaluations as "happy sheets". 'Nuff said.

Another tact to the research problem has essentially been to re-write the

"We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well – for we will not fight to save what we do not love."

– Stephen Jay Gould

underlying purpose of environmental education. So now we can proudly point to statistical evidence that when the environment is used as an "integrating concept" in school-based educational activities, students' scores rise on achievement tests. This is a great arrow to have in our marketing quiver when we're trying to convince school districts to work with our nature centers, and certainly raising test scores is a commendable goal. But how many of you work for organizations whose mission statements speak about raising children's standard scores on math, English and social studies achievement tests? This approach to environmental education basically changes it from a goal into an instructional method, not unlike the Montessori or Waldorf approaches to education. And it leaves intact the old paradigm, that cognitive learning will somehow magically lead to changes in personal behavior, on a societal scale.

Yet, while there hasn't been real, longitudinal research directly focused on e.e. and its adult behavioral impacts, there is a great deal of research that can *inform* environmental education, and we need to pay attention to it. For one, there have been numerous studies, in various disciplines, about the impact of knowledge on personal behavior. You can probably find one of these studies to support just about any position you'd choose, but the preponderance of the evidence is clear: there is no straight-line relationship between knowledge and behavior. One study specifically looked at conservation issues, and found no significant differences in environmental behavior between very well-informed professional environmentalists and other people who had dramatically

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less knowledge of the environment.

If you think about it, this is not surprising. We are not really a rational species. If we were – if we let knowledge dictate our behavior – then no one would ever drive without fastening their seat belt, no one would ever eat french fries or deep-fried cheese curds, and no one would ever live in a mobile home in Oklahoma. Again, we are talking about human behavior, and it's a heckuva lot more complicated than just left brain comprehension.

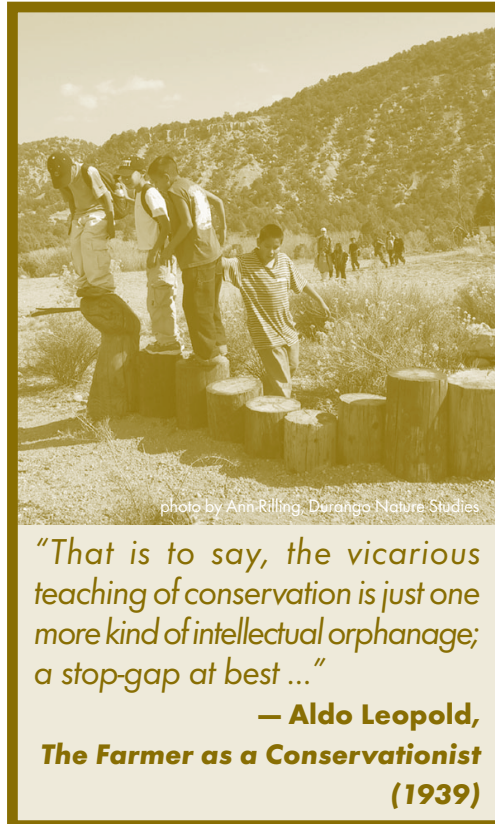
Thankfully, there *is* a lot of research that can guide us about what kinds of experiences turn children into adult conservationists. The more I look, the more of this research I find. It's done by serious academics, it's been done in several countries, and its results are pretty consistent. This research is usually called "significant life experiences" or sometimes just environmental psychology, and it's based on self-reporting studies. That is, adults who are clearly conservationists are asked to reflect on what life experiences steered them towards their adult values of environmentalism. Louise Chawla, a researcher from Kentucky, reviewed many of these studies and summed up their findings. In order of greatest influence, those life experiences are:

1. the experience of natural areas as a child – i.e., a sense of place that comes from frequent and routine play in a "wild" place, be it the back forty of the family farm, the pond down the block, or the vacant lot next door;
2. the influence of one or more mentors, nearly always family members, who shared their own love of nature and guided children in similar pursuits;
3. involvement with outdoor or environmental organizations, such as scouting;
4. negative personal experiences with environmental degradation, such as the neighborhood woods being turned into condos or the *Exxon Valdez* leaking all over their town beach;
5. education;
6. friends; and
7. influence of their job.

This information is tremendously

important to what we do, and a couple of conclusions are clear.

One, the area where most of our organizations focus their efforts – structured educational programs – is far down the list. These programs are not without influence; they aren't a complete waste of time. But their influence is not nearly as high as the percentage of our time and resources that we typically spend on them. And two, ***the heart comes before the head***. Which is to say, open-ended, unstructured, informal, frequent, and



"That is to say, the vicarious teaching of conservation is just one more kind of intellectual orphanage; a stop-gap at best ..."

— Aldo Leopold,
The Farmer as a Conservationist
(1939)

affective (emotional) experiences in nature during the childhood years are what have the most influence on adult conservation values. Remember tree climbing, bug collecting, and tromping through the woods? That's it; it's really no big mystery. The true paradigm turns out to be the exact opposite of what we've been commonly practicing. It should be "If only they cared, they would come to understand." First we fall in love with nature, then we are motivated to learn more about it – including what we have to do to protect it. Most of us have known this all along from our own life stories, but we haven't created organizations that effectively promote and encourage it!

Stephen Kellert, a Yale researcher who is famous for his work on human attitudes about wildlife and the environment, has defined three types of nature experiences that should be part of our planning and thinking lexicon. *Vicarious* experiences come from things like television, movies and the internet. This, of course, is an area where the volume of material has exploded during our lifetimes, and to which children now have massive exposure. The nature shows you can view on nightly television are truly extraordinary compared to what most of us grew up with, but these experiences can't be touched, smelled, or fully felt. They are strong cognitively, but weak in affective impact – and the more often you see video of a cheetah taking down an antelope, the less emotional impact it has.

Kellert's second type is *Indirect* experiences. These are essentially what most of our organizations practice: activities where the participants are actually in the out-of-doors, with all the sensory stimulation that brings. But the activities are controlled, with time schedules, instructors in charge, curricula and trails to follow, and specific objectives to be met. Kellert's third type he terms *Direct* experiences. These are what I would call *nature play*, and what the significant life experience research most often points to: unstructured, unsupervised, spontaneous and frequent activity in wild places – or at least places that seem wild to a child. This includes those tree houses, as well as digging holes to China, hiding in shrub thickets, frying ants with a magnifier, and damming up small creeks just to see what will happen. Kellert does not reach an absolute conclusion about the relative power of these three types of experiences, but his leaning is clear: *Direct* nature experiences may well be a true personal prerequisite to gaining real impact from either *Indirect* or *Vicarious* nature experiences.

What We Need to Do

As leaders of the nature center and environmental education professions, we need to take these concepts and research findings to heart, and use them to guide our work. We need to find ways for our organizations to enable the very kinds of childhood experiences that research points to as most often influencing

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children to become adult conservationists – the same experiences that most of us personally recall as nurturing our own conservation values.

Unfortunately, there has probably never been a time when children were less likely to spontaneously enjoy nature play. David Orr, from Oberlin College, cites one study that revealed that children's average time spent outdoors dropped from 86 minutes per day in 1981 to 42 minutes in 1997. And which of us would doubt that this number was far higher in the decades before 1981?

Today roughly 80% of Americans live in urban areas, where neighborhood access to greenspaces is less and less common. Even where greenspaces are nearby, parental fears often prohibit children from playing there. Studies have shown that kidnapping is statistically less common than it was a generation ago, but crimes against children are now so highly publicized that the universal perception is that it is dangerous to allow your young children to go muck around in the woods.

Further, the whole nature of childhood has changed. Free time is virtually extinct. Kids are programmed from dawn to dusk with school, hockey practice, piano lessons, tai chi, church activities, and debate team. In my own St. Paul suburb, one elementary school actually submitted a grant seeking funds to purchase a PDA (e.g., a Palm Pilot) for each of their third grade students, because the school administration felt the students needed them to manage their schedules. Thankfully, they didn't get the grant – but the problem and perception endures.

The scary realization is that we

Boomers – as many of us here undoubtedly are – may be the last generation to have a widespread memory of unstructured childhood play in nature. Robert Michael Pyle, a world-class lepidopterist who writes passionately on this subject, terms this the *extinction of experience*: the erosion of children's direct, spontaneous contact with raw nature. His book, *The Thunder Tree*, is a powerful statement of this dilemma, which has huge implications for our society's conservation values. As he eloquently puts it, "What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known a wren?"

The childhood experiences that are needed are wildly different from e.e. lessons that correlate with your local school district's learning objectives 4.1, 4.3 and 4.8. They bear no resemblance to e.e. programs that bring students to your center for one

60-minute visit, or even for three or four visits per year, or for one four-day residential experience during their entire K-12 schooling. They have virtually nothing in common with being told to stay on the trails, don't pick or collect anything, keep your voice down, don't throw rocks in the pond, leave only footprints and take only memories.

Instead, what's needed is perfectly summed-up by the long-time mantra of Marcie Oltman, a veteran environmental educator who I'm proud to consider a dear friend: *Frequent, positive experiences in nature*. Every word of that phrase is important, but I believe that the most daunting one for the e.e. profession is *frequent*. Louis Chawla says that the most influential nature experiences are the ones that are part of children's *regular rhythm of daily life*. How many of our organizations come even remotely close



to making *Direct* nature experiences a part of children's daily lives?

Further, these experiences need to happen close to home – ideally within a few hundred yards – and they need to be unconstrained by adult environmental ethics. As Pyle puts it, "For special places to work their magic on kids, they need to be able to do some clamber and damage. They need to be free to climb trees, muck about, catch things, and get wet – above all, to leave the trail." Pyle thus argues the need for "rough ground": little patches of undeveloped nature that are not manicured, planted, controlled or protected, but are close-to-home and available for kids to play in, as they please.

But rough ground is a rare resource, even in our own backyards. Tidy flower beds and putting green lawns usually trump rough-and-tumble nature play. I'm proud to note that my own backyard has had a good-sized digging pit for seven years. It is actually just a chunk of bare ground that my kids can dig and damage to their hearts' delight. It's even more fun when they add water, or bury all kinds of toy treasures to be unearthed in the future. When we first made it, other neighborhood children started coming over just to join in the digging. Of course, they sometimes went home muddy, and we had neighborhood moms mad at us. But somehow suburban life has gone on – and my kids have enjoyed at least a little patch of ground that they can truly call their own. Simple as that example seems, it's a big leap to extend that concept to the organizational level.

For most nature centers, the idea of

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setting aside land for kids to abuse is anathema. Nearly all of our organizations have evolved on the foundation of a strong land ethic that implores us to treat our lands with extreme care. Truth be known, most nature center lands are only ecologically significant as remnants of local ecosystems; few centers have truly threatened or endangered species which might be impacted by kids' activities. Yet we typically treat our nature center lands like they are permafrost, as though one wayward footstep will leave an imprint for centuries. We underestimate mother nature in this way; she's a lot more resilient than we give her credit for. It's true, of course, that thousands of kids engaging in unsupervised nature play at our centers would inevitably have some impact. Branches would be broken, plants would be trampled, foxes would be scared away, and tadpoles would be caught by the zillions. Lord forbid, some kid might even build a treehouse on our property! This thought goes against virtually all we have preached and practiced, but *our practices aren't working*. The threat to the world's ecology does not come from kids building treehouses. In fact, it may come from kids *not* building them!

So, broadly, these are the types of nature experiences that research – and our own memories – support as most influential. *Child-directed*: that means no controlling teachers, parents, or other close chaperones. *Open ended*: the kids come and go as they please. *Unstructured*: what they choose to do is up to them. *Positive*: that means they're having fun, and aren't mummified by rules. *In nature*: getting muddy, wet, cold, messy, bitten, scraped and bumped, and discovering their own "teachable moments" that they think are just plain fun. *Frequent*: as often as can possibly happen. This

latter one, *frequency*, is tremendously important, and just as tremendously hard for most e.e. organizations to achieve. If you manage to encourage and allow the other attributes, but the children still have to depend upon car transportation to enjoy them, then you have probably failed. **Frequent, positive experiences in nature.** Take it to heart.

I once read a definition of insanity which I think is relevant here: *Doing things the same way, and expecting different results*. Our results have not been good. So why do we keep doing the same things? The challenge to all of us is to create new structures and paradigms that are solidly based on the available research. This shouldn't mean a change in *mission* for any environmental education organization, only a change in *methods*. And it does not completely negate the value of our traditional e.e. programs. Rather, it calls upon us to adjust, evolve, complement, and sequence them. We must realize that without frequent, open-ended, bond-forming childhood experiences in nature, our more cognitive e.e. programs will too often fall on infertile ground and will have no lasting impact on personal behavior. So finding ways to create the proper sequence of nature experiences – beginning with frequent, *Direct* experiences – is imperative. And it has to be much more than just including a predator/prey game or a camouflaged toothpick hunt at the beginning of your existing lessons.

I want to stress that there are few if any original ideas here, but I thought it would be worthwhile to share some of the thinking and research that is already available to us, and that we need to pay more attention to. I hope it will serve to generate more thinking, ideas, and conversations about our profession's future. Thank you for the chance to talk with you today. 🌱

A Suggested Bibliography

This list just scratches the surface of the available literature and research that can inform us on the question of "How Do You Make A Conservationist?". I continue to find more promising titles regularly, but these are among my favorites.

Books:

The Thunder Tree, by Robert Michael Pyle (a powerful autobiographical view of the impact of "rough ground" on childhood; Pyle is probably the most eloquent spokesperson for this philosophy)

Children and Nature, edited by Stephen Kellert and Peter Kahn (an excellent 2002 compilation of relevant research summaries and essays; I found about half of them to be very meaningful)

The Geography of Childhood, by Stephen Trimble and Gary Paul Nabhan (a 1994 evocation of the impacts of nature and culture on childhood)

Beyond Ecophobia, by David Sobel (more of a long essay than a book, this focuses on the need to remove fear from children's encounters with nature and replace it with developmentally appropriate love and passion for the outdoors)

Natural Learning: The Life History of an Environmental Schoolyard, by Robin Moore (reviews the nature-focused schoolyard that Moore and others created in Berkeley; both the design process and the results of this schoolyard are compelling)

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Extinction of Experience, Part 2: How Can We Apply It to Our Work?

by Ken Finch

There is today a growing societal concern about the overall condition of childhood: how it has changed, and what the long-term results of those changes will be. Worries are widespread about critical developmental years spent prone in front of electronic devices, with minimal outdoor physical exercise and precious little free time for creative and social play. These concerns are receiving a fair amount of media attention, and are beginning to draw philanthropic dollars in search of solutions.

However, few people view these matters as an environmental issue. When asked, though, most people over 30 or so recall “nature play” as a revered component of their own childhood – and most of them realize that these experiences are far less common for today’s youth. In fact, after scores of wide-ranging conversations about the core ideas of the “extinction of experience” and the need for “rough ground”, it is clear to me that these concepts resonate with remarkable consistency for many, many people. It is not too hard to bring these conversations to the next level: a realization that the loss of open-ended, unstructured childhood experiences in natural settings may dramatically affect the conservation values of the next generation. In my experience, people are quick to grasp this

problem, and equally quick to be concerned about it. But far less clear is the next step: *What do we do about it?*

If you’re looking for clear and easy answers to this dilemma, you’re reading the wrong article! Truth be known, this is an emerging issue without a lot of certain prescriptions. But nature centers and other environmental learning centers are perfectly positioned to begin addressing this issue within their own communities. There will certainly not be any one solution, any single best practice that will begin to re-knit the frayed bond between children and wild nature. But nature centers can lead the way in testing new approaches, and in then sharing their successes and frustrations among their colleagues and with society in general.

In this second section of the 2004 Special Edition of *Directions*, Gordon Maupin and I raise some initial thoughts and ideas about how nature centers and environmental educators can begin bringing nature back into the daily rhythm of children’s lives. The best ideas and discussions, though, lie ahead: in your own future articles, in ANCA list-serve discussions, and in ANCA Summits. Please engage in this quest and share your experiences – it just might help us all to save the world. 🌱

Digression of Hope: Start Telling Stories

by Gordon Maupin

How can we transform our nature centers to address extinction of experience as part of the mission? I was expecting a difficult challenge selling the concept to our board. Now, I think a majority of our board will embrace the idea. I encourage you to talk with people about their childhood contact with nature. Once you get the topic going, the stories flow. Ancient memories come to life. Smiles erupt as people access memories of the happiest times of their lives. You reacted that way. Others do, too.

Recently I brought the subject up with a board member and his wife over lunch. As I launched into my story, the board member’s wife stopped me. She informed me that she had had a family member disappear, never to be heard from again. Her personal tragedy was nearly a conversation stopper. How could we continue to seriously discuss children playing outdoors unsupervised?

A guarded conversation continued regarding danger to children and risk. Then her stories began to flow. She

had lost a family member, but she had also played in nature. Before long, she was smiling and the conversation gave way to stories of climbing trees, catching bugs, making special hideaways, wading in creeks, and all the things we did during the happiest, most innocent times of our lives.

“One touch of nature
makes the whole world
kin”

— William Shakespeare
Troilus and Cressida
Act III, Scene 3

Following the ANCA session at the 2003 Summit, a knot of people were standing around discussing Ken Finch’s talk about the *Extinction of Experience*. Someone handed me a Yellow-shafted Flicker feather they had found along one of our trails. It was a beautiful black and golden primary. I used the feather the way some American Indian tribes used a feather at council. Whoever held the feather had the floor. We passed the feather and told stories of childhood play in nature. The power of remembering and the power of storytelling transformed the folks in the group. Pass a feather at your next board meeting.

When conversations have such power, when they touch people so deeply, anything is possible. 🌱

Tear Down the Walls

Barriers Between Children and Nature:

An Incomplete List

by **Gordon Maupin**

Barriers separate children from nature. The barriers are high. The barriers are embedded in modern American society. This is only a partial list.

- **The Bogey Man:**

It seems every news broadcast reports another missing child. This translates into fear. Parents are afraid. The media reinforces every parent's greatest fear that pedophiles are standing on every corner. Shopping malls are death traps, but nature is worse: kidnappers lurking behind every tree are relentlessly plotting to steal your babies. Experts are endlessly quoted saying "Don't let your children be outdoors unsupervised." Who can argue with that advice?

- **Deadly Fear:**

People are taught to fear nature. "We are all going to die" from Lyme Disease, West Nile Virus, Poison Ivy, ticks, mosquitoes, snakes, sunburn, falling off cliffs, UV rays, drowning.... there's a never-ending litany of horrible dangers associated with being outdoors. These fears are constantly reinforced by the media. The worst part of this is that there is some level of truth to all the dangers. Bad things really do happen. But no one ever discusses the *true* level of risk. Danger makes a better story. Fear sells. Even "reality" television makes camping in a natural setting seem like a hideous ordeal, when it just looks like fun to people with experience in the outdoors.

- **The Lawyer Demon:**

We'll all be sued to death. Even if we aren't wrong, defending lawsuits will destroy us. What would your lawyer say if you encouraged children to play outdoors unsupervised.? What would your board say?

- **The Rat Race:**

Our kids must get into the right college so they can get the best education and

meet the most important people, so they can get the best job, so they can race rats faster than others race rats. Who has time to play outdoors? What important job skills can children learn in a tree house?

- **The Schedule:**

Organized sports, music lessons, Boy and Girl Scouts, 4H, religious organizations, YMCA, school extracurricular activities, and enrichment learning. It is another endless list (which actually includes classes and programs at our nature centers). Many children are booked from early in the morning 'til they drop at night. Parents think they are doing their child a favor.

- **The Media:**

Think of the media broadly. It is more pervasive than you know. It is not just television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Include computers, Game Boys, the internet, movies, plays, music, advertising, telecommunications, and much more. Every minute spent on a computer could be a minute outdoors. Can nature compete with these glitzy alternatives offering instant gratification and sedentary thrills?

- **Vanishing Opportunities:**

We are an urbanized society. People live "full" lives without venturing outside urban environments. Urban open spaces are either manicured parks, brown fields, or worse. Suburban land is divided into quarter-acre monocultures of chemical-drenched bluegrass lawns. The lawn chemical people actually put up little flags telling children not to play on the lawn. Far too many urban streams are buried inside culverts or channelized by concrete walls. If Mom did say "go outside and play," where can an urban child go? Where can a suburban child go?

Knocking down these barriers is a

labor worthy of Hercules. Every task set before Hercules was, on its face, impossible. When I look at the whole, I despair. However, there are three things that give me heart.

First, we are not alone. It is not the job of nature centers and environmental educators to fight this fight alone. We must find allies, and there are allies to be found.

Second, any big task can be divided into smaller tasks. When considered together they may seem insurmountable. When considered separately they are still formidable, but perhaps not so Herculean.

Third, partial success is still success.



Mission Statements and the Extinction of Experience

by Gordon Maupin

The challenge presented by the extinction of experience is daunting. It calls for a paradigm shift. The key questions are: “What can we do about extinction of experience?” and “How can we create frequent, positive encounters with nature?”

Finch states it should not mean a change in our mission. He is correct. However, environmental education organizations should re-examine their missions in light of concerns over this issue. Everything starts with an organization’s mission statement. To address extinction of experience, nature centers need to change the interpretation of their mission. Mission statements such as “provide a significant environmental learning experience for every fifth grade student in nameless geographical area” should be discarded, or at least reconsidered.

“We need to give them [children] time outdoors, where they can meet and savor the world that humans have not made – pill bugs on a sidewalk, a swarm of tadpoles in a puddle, a tree for climbing, a sky aflame with sunset, a kiss of wind.”

**—Scott Russell Sanders
A Conservationist’s Manifesto**

The E.E. community, and the conservation and environmental communities at large, share one common mission which can be stated in two parts:

1. Prepare the next generation to inherit the Earth, for inherit it they will; *and*
2. Make sure some portion of the natural world is left to inherit.

It is not a nature center’s primary mission to boost scores on standardized tests. If we do improve test scores, that’s great – but it is not the point. Improving test scores on environmental topics is a good *second* step in preparing a child to inherit the earth. No one should claim that cognitive learning is unimportant. However, for cognitive learning to have its full impact in creating life-long conservationists, people must first have a deep

emotional bond with nature. As Finch points out, that emotional bond is best sculpted from frequent positive contact with nature at an early age.

Most nature centers have a primary mission of education, which is usually approached in a relatively formal and structured sense. But when we aim for frequent, positive encounters with nature, we will have to think differently about our land and how children use it. Frequent, positive encounters with nature don’t happen in a hands-off, stay-on-the-trail environment. They don’t happen in the “take nothing but pictures” kind of place. Close supervision by adults reminding kids to “stay out of the creek, don’t get dirty, and watch out for poison ivy” may actually be counter-productive.

Frequent, positive encounters with nature happen when kids are on the loose in places that are not designed by adults. Children need to be free to collect things, get muddy, climb trees, and just play and experience. I’ve never seen a standardized test that asks how to skip a stone. However, stone skipping is a physical and intellectual exercise that teaches children on many levels – not the least of which is sheer enjoyment of the outdoors!

How do the rules at your center fight extinction of experience? How do the rules at your center contribute to extinction of experience? How can your view of your land change? How can your view of children change?

Your mission is to create generations of citizens who cherish nature. They won’t develop a personal bond with nature in a classroom or over the internet. Think about your mission. ✨



Nature Centers as Playgrounds

by Ken Finch

What child wants to only stay on the trails when they visit a nature center or park? What child doesn't want to collect things, run, climb trees, and explore in the rocks and shrubs? Yet at most nature centers we actually, *officially*, try to squash those behaviors. In the process, we help break the bonds between child and nature.

So what would happen if you took two or three acres out of your 50 – or 500, or 5000 – marked them off with a little snow fencing, and told kids that they could play there, in any way they wanted that didn't cause bodily harm? Maybe you clear a little area and leave kid-sized shovels nearby. Maybe you have an open storage rack for buckets and dip nets next to a small pond. Maybe you deliberately stockpile "loose parts" for kids to build and create with, like small logs, branches, tarps, rocks, plastic pipes and their connecting links, and whatever else comes to mind.

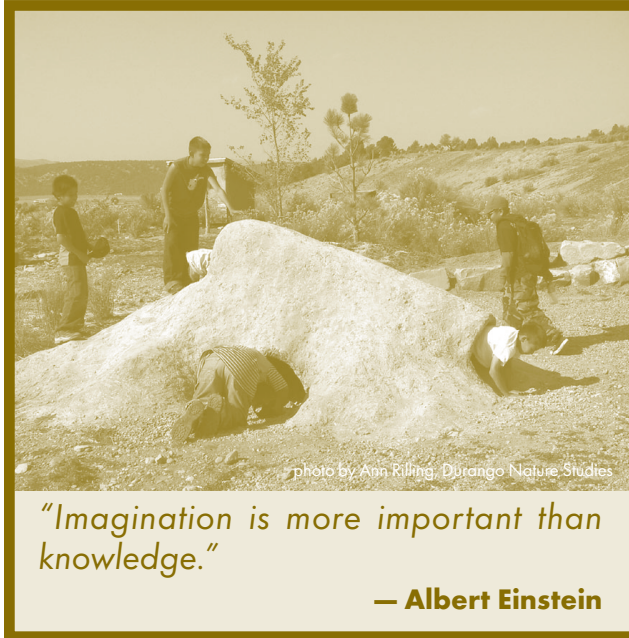
Maybe you even bring in some old lumber, nails, and hammers.

By now, all your red flags should be flying high. We're conditioned to view these things as not only dangerous, but

revolutionary. But you know what? That's the way childhood has always been, up until about the last 30 years. The actual revolution is that kids *don't* play this way any more!

What's really at risk? *Your land?* Not if you choose the right spot, and perhaps re-locate the play area every year or two so the vegetation can recover. *The kids?* Yes, there's some risk, but statistically it's probably less than riding their bike down the block. (*And* it's less risky for our planet than turning children away from nature play altogether!) *Your center's reputation and mission?* Go back and re-read Gordon's mission statement piece, to the left. Still worried? Try using volunteers as passive "play leaders" to loosely oversee kids' activities, like some European countries do.

Which center will be the first to try it? 🌱



"Imagination is more important than knowledge."

— Albert Einstein

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Nature-Focused Preschools

by Ken Finch

Suppose I told you that there is a tested, proven means of e.e. that brings the same kids to your center for at least 3 hours per day; for 2, 3 or 5 days every week; for a minimum of nine consecutive months – and often for two full years. Suppose the core activity of this approach is open-ended explorations of your nature center site, and the nature play that goes along with it. Suppose it is also a near-perfect match with age-appropriate best practices for child development. Suppose that it also gets parents involved – as donors and volunteers – far beyond any other e.e. approach. And suppose I told you that this approach to e.e. can completely pay for itself.

Would it matter to you that those kids are only 3 to 5 years old, and have no interest in global warming, ozone holes, and Total Maximum Daily Loads?

For years, if not decades, much of the e.e. world sneered at preschool programming. It was a “complete waste of time”, as one IMS grant reviewer told me some 15 years ago. The typical, driven practitioner of our profession was impatient to teach facts, and to reap the behavioral harvest that would certainly result. There was no time for “bugs and bunnies” classes where the students didn’t walk away itching to preach to their congressman, city council members, or at least their own parents. But while such programs were running faster and faster, without any clear gains, a few nature centers were quietly changing kids lives through actual preschools that are an integral part of their operations.

These nature-focused preschools should not be confused with the once-per-week or once-per-month “mom and tot” type of programs that are now ubiquitous in nature centers. No, these are actual licensed preschools, with dedicated staff and facilities, a tuition-based approach, and a level of two-way commitment far exceeding any other type of nature center program.

In a typical day, the students at a nature center preschool will spend *at least* an hour outside – in any type of weather other than truly dangerous storms – in gently guided, open-ended discovery. Some days they might make it to the pond to catch tadpoles and watch the swallows, some days they might follow fox tracks in the snow, and some days they might do nothing but roll down the hill in cushions of autumn leaves.

When the teachers are good at their craft, there is no strict agenda, no prepared lecture, and no list of ten birds to identify. Instead, the kids play and explore, in a close approximation of the kind of nature experiences that so many of us remember from our own childhoods. And when they are back inside their special, kid-friendly classrooms, the nature theme continues through stories, open-ended art projects, classroom animals, and free play materials. It is not a perfect replication of the nature play we remember, since the children are always supervised. But, on the other hand, this negates the parental fear of letting their child explore outdoors.

The result is a depth of nature experience that is virtually unknown to most nature centers. Children enrolled in a nature-focused preschool for even a single year will probably get more direct contact with the outdoors than they will have in all their subsequent K to 12 school years, *combined*. The number of kids served is small; perhaps 60 to 180 are enrolled, depending upon schedules and the number of classrooms. But the depth of experience is tremendous. And as a result, the impacts are lasting.

These early childhood years are known to be when we form many of our lasting adult values. Could we do any better than to ensure that one of those values is a deep love for the outdoors? Nature-focused preschools may be the closest approach there is to having a *structured* means of simulating the bond-forming *unstructured* childhood explorations



photo by Ann Rilling, Durango Nature Studies

“If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil.”

— Rachel Carson

of nature that were once so common, but are now so problematic.

Think, also, of the marketing advantages: there isn’t a community, an ethnic group, or an income level where parents are not looking for quality child care options. Moreover, they fully expect to pay for it, at market rates. For some, this will mean taking advantage of governmental tuition support, but it still pays full tuition to the school. And in a nature center setting, could there be any warmer, fuzzier fund-raising pitch than to seek endowed scholarship funds so low-income children can attend a nature-focused preschool?

These preschools are few in number, though long-standing ones are found in the New Canaan, Westport, and Kalamazoo Nature Centers. Dodge Nature Center in Minnesota opened a fabulous new one a few years ago, and Schlitz (Milwaukee) just opened theirs this year. Already Schlitz’s Director, Buffy Cheek, is calling it the best part of their spectacular new, 32,000 square foot facility. More preschools will follow, as the word finally gets out.

So does it matter that it’s not the same old e.e. model, if it actually works? Maybe that’s the only thing that should matter! 🌱

Land: the First Step to Fighting the Extinction of Experience

by **Gordon Maupin**

Children need to meet nature with their fingers and on their knees. They need to manipulate and destroy. They need to build and change. They need to dream and make believe. They need to get wet and slide in the mud. They need to catch creatures. They need to be away from adult control. They need to be in a place designed by nature, not a place designed by adults. They need to commit acts we would deplore at our nature centers!

“Take nothing but pictures; leave nothing but footprints” is fine for a pristine natural area. It is even okay for our nature centers. But children don’t need pristine natural areas. Children don’t need facilities. A naturalist or environmental educator is not required for children to learn about nature. Nature itself creates a lifelong bond with a child, if only the magic is allowed to happen.

The first step to cracking the barrier between children and nature is obvious. Children need a place to go where adults aren’t telling them what they can and cannot do. Nature Centers and Land Trusts need to own waste ground, ideally urban and suburban waste ground. Yes, we need to own vacant lots, unwanted creek banks, steep, unbuildable land. Isolated small weedy spots surrounded by development, wetlands passed over by developers.

All we have to do is own the land, pay our insurance premiums, and let kids play on it. The Wilderness Center owns land that meets this criteria. In the late 1960s three acres on the edge of a nearby small town were donated to us. For years, we occasionally plotted for a way to gracefully give away the land. In the 1980s ten more acres on the edge of a subdivision were donated to us with the stipulation that we keep the land for the lifetime of the donor. We plotted to sell it when she

passed away and slug the cash into the endowment.

My ideas evolved. When we visited those tracts, we discovered evidence of local children using the land for play. I always felt good about that, but my intellect and training told me this was bad. After all, someone might sue us if a child was injured. The land didn’t really fit our mission very well. We never used these lands for environmental education. We came close to giving one tract to local government, but we could never quite go through with the deal.

I knew these spots were important well before the concept of extinction of experience gave shape to my thoughts. In the late 1980s, I recall telling a potential land donor I felt it was important for kids to have “a place to play Daniel Boone.”

Urban land is expensive when you have to buy it. How can a nonprofit nature center acquire urban land? The answer? It is not always expensive! Sometimes its free. Sometimes people will pay you to take it. It would be great to be able to purchase tracts of prime land and just let children go play on it, but the expense is usually prohibitive. However, the kind of land where children can just go play is often unwanted. Developers are frequently required to leave behind wetlands or construct on-site wetland mitigation projects. Any land unsuitable for buildings and lawns is a problem for developers. They need to get rid of it. Often they will survey it in with building lots so that every lot owner ends up with a piece. Other times they just have difficulty getting rid of it. All nature centers have to do is be willing to accept it and be willing to insure themselves against liability. There are times when a developer will even pay to get rid of land.

“Wasteground” might be a burden to a developer, but it could be a blessing to a child. 🌱

“To counter the historic trend toward the loss of wildness where children play, it is clear that we need to find ways to let children roam beyond the pavement, to gain access to vegetation and earth that allows them to tunnel, climb, or even fall. And because formal playgrounds are the only outdoors that many children experience anymore, should we be paying more attention to planting, and less to building on them? Naturalist Franklin Burroughs is among those who have argued that children need places where they can roughhouse on tree limbs and swing on vines without being told that the plants are hands-off: ‘Better to let kids be a hazard to nature,’ Burroughs told a gathering of conservationists, ‘and let nature be a hazard to them.’”

— **Gary Paul Nabhan,**
The Geography of Childhood

Creating Intentional Places for *Frequent* Nature Play

by Ken Finch

Dog-scaping. Yes, you read that right. Not long ago I heard a radio ad for a new company, here in the Twin Cities, that specializes in dog-scaping. I.e., creating the perfect yard for Fido's play, poop, bone-hiding, amorous escapades, and whatever else it is that dogs do. If it had been during *Prairie Home Companion*, I would have taken it as a joke. But it was real. I think this begs for deep thought well beyond the easy observation that we certainly are an affluent society. I can't do it justice myself, but I'd love to read a Barbara Kingsolver essay on this one.

But I digress. Strangely enough, I've never heard (or seen) an ad for a company that does *kid-scaping*. Oh, there's zillions of firms that will happily sell you a few thousand dollars worth of playground equipment for your backyard. It'll have swings, slides, windows, a steering wheel, a club house, and all sorts of other cool stuff. Kids will love it, for a little while. But it won't attract grasshoppers and butterflies to catch. It won't include any shrub thickets to hide in, or trees to climb. It won't have a pond or stream to muck in. It won't bring more birds to your yard, or foxes, or raccoons, or snakes, or toads. It won't provide a place to dig. (And dig some more.) It won't spark daydreams of steamy jungle explorations, or frigid polar treks (I live in Minnesota, remember), or allow kids to build their own clubhouse, however rickety it might be.

In short, it will trade off creativity and real nature for structure and artificiality. That pretty much sums up all of childhood nowadays, doesn't it?

A further irony lies in the many nature organizations that help people create wildlife-friendly yards. You know, native plants, a water source, cover, food plants, bird feeders, etc. I'll bet your own yard looks like that; mine does, too. Oftentimes these lessons go a step further to stress no chemical use, capturing and re-using rainwater, developing rain gardens, and

other sound ecological practices.

An entire industry has developed around these approaches. Many bird stores now also do home naturescaping, and it's a common offering for retail nurseries and landscape designers. Go to any big home and garden expo and you're sure to see many, many firms and products to help you create a more naturalistic landscape around your home. (Heck, even our President is fond of photo shoots that show him pulling brush from his Texas ranch. Apparently that's considered good land stewardship in the Lone Star State. Maybe it's buckthorn....)

But just try to find a hint of *childsaping* among all of this. That is, designing home yards, schoolyards, parks, and neighborhoods to *intentionally* create or enhance them for children's play. And I don't mean ball fields and commercial play equipment; I mean nature play. The stuff we all fondly remember doing in our youth. Luckily, all those wildlife-friendly yards do happen to encompass many features that make the space more fun for kids, but the kids still rank second to birds. Can't we improve on this?

Nature in Quarter-Acre Bites

I admit to being a little embarrassed by my suburban home and lot. However, for the record, it's a whopping .28 acres, so clearly I'm in a different stratosphere than all those standard .25 acre lots. More importantly, we back up to a

city-owned greenspace, which is the salvation of my personal homeland. Still, most of my environmental colleagues either seem to have a few acres in the exurbs, or are doing the urban home-steading thing. So I feel very vanilla and boring in my choice of home ground. But, like it or not, boring vanilla suburban neighborhoods is where most Americans



photo by Jennifer Klefner, Durango Nature Studies

"There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon, that object he became
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain
part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years."

—Walt Whitman,

"There Was a Child Went Forth,"
Leaves of Grass (1855)

live nowadays. If we want to reach them, *en masse*, that's the turf we need to connect to.

To truly foster *frequent, positive experiences in nature*, kids have to live close to someplace wild (wild in their eyes, that is). In our highly urban society, physical nearness to *rough ground* is the only sure way to enable kids to have frequent nature experiences. This doesn't, of course, mean that we should cease our *infrequent* nature experiences, out of despair. But we must do better than just vacations in the parks and seasonal trips to the local nature center. Ultimately, the only viable way to do this for lots of kids

Frequent

(continued from page 14)

is by getting nature back close to them. And what's closer than their own home?

As a first step, we need to re-examine our own biases. Most nature center folk have been trained to think in terms of whole ecosystems. When we apply this to land – like nature centers – it usually means “more is better.” After all, black bears don't hang out in suburban yards and salamanders aren't fond of bluegrass. So we've spent our careers either acquiring more and better land or wishing that we could. Let's keep doing that; it has lots of great ecological benefits. But educational impact is not necessarily one of them.

If you follow the thought lines of Robert Michael Pyle's extinction of experience issue, you understand that the size and ecological quality of land are not key determinants for meaningful nature play. Vacant lots are dynamite – kids can dig, climb, catch bugs, get dirty, *et al*, and no one will yell at them for it. Oddly, though, your typical suburban lot is actually worse, because it's protected land. Mom's roses and dad's lawn (pardon the stereotyping) are most often sacrosanct. Let's set out to change that.

Over the past 10 or 15 years we've all witnessed a shift in home landscaping towards more naturalistic designs. It's still far from where we'd like it to be, but the trend is clear. So let's start the next trend: yards that are designed for nature play. If we apply our educational expertise, our marketing savvy, and our organizations' credibility, this can begin to happen. It doesn't mean, though, that suburban yards have to look like vacant lots. So far as I know, no one's yet created the prototype of what a great childscaped yard will look like, but certainly there's room for some structure and beauty that won't completely anger the neighbors.

So if there's no prototype, let's make it up. Think of what we liked to do as kids, and then figure out what kinds of spaces will allow those activities. Dirt, sand, water, hiding places, climbing places, loose parts to build with, lots of small (kid-scale) animals, fallen leaves, pine cones, more dirt, edible plants, little hills to roll or slide down – the list of

components is probably endless. I'm willing to bet that these can be combined into great nature play spaces that won't have to be big. In fact, I'll bet that a pretty good version can fit into that standard quarter-acre lot – or even into the backyard half of it. So find a homeowner guinea pig, make it so, take lots of pictures, and share them with the rest of us.

Community Spaces

What's big and green, bare all over, free to use, and close to most people's homes? A cupie doll goes out to anyone who correctly answered “schoolyards”. Obviously, all schoolyards aren't created equal. But in a heckuva lot of areas, schoolyards are just plain grass – often acres of it, unadorned by any tree, shrub, water, hill, or anything else other than lost soccer balls. In some places they are even worse: a scant acre or two of asphalt, punctuated by basketball poles. Either way, though, they have one tremendous attribute: they are within walking/biking distance of a lot of kids!

For years our profession has created schoolyard nature areas, but perhaps for the wrong reasons. Most of them have been created as outdoor laboratories – handy places for cognitive, formal learning about nature. That's not a bad thing, but it plays right into the old paradigm: “If only they understood, they would come to care”. So these have largely been places of the brain, not places of the heart.

Perhaps as a consequence, school nature areas have an unfortunate tendency to sprout, flourish, and die. They usually are the creation of one or a few devoted champions, most often teachers. However, teachers tend to change schools, retire, die, or switch careers – and all too often their pet project is then left without anyone fighting to preserve it.

But what if we took those school nature areas and turned them into nature *play* spaces, using the same kinds of components as in a home nature play yard but on a larger scale? Then

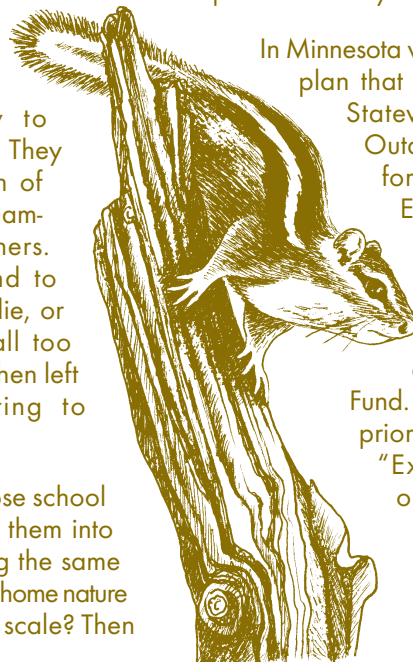
their biggest appeal and use would come before school, during recess, after school, and on weekends and holidays. Kids would use them on their own terms, not under the guidance of a teacher. These same places could still be passable outdoor labs, but their design would emphasize nature play: open-ended, unstructured play in a wild setting. Such school nature playgrounds might be seen as more of a community asset (like any other playground) rather than as just an outdoor classroom. So the local neighborhoods might become their champions, offering much more support and sustainability than just a few teachers.

Robin Moore's *Natural Learning: The Life History of an Environmental Schoolyard* is a great case study in this genre. The ultimate ending for this Berkeley schoolyard was sad, but it lasted for 10 years and influenced a lot of lives. And maybe – just maybe – it would have endured longer if a local nature center had also served as a champion for it.

Once we've converted schoolyards into nature play areas, let's take on neighborhood parks. These may not be as common as schools, but there's still lots of them. Too often, though, these parks tend to be either (a) trees with manicured picnic spaces underneath them, or (b) wilder habitats where children's play is not encouraged. But there's no reason they can't be converted, just like schoolyards.

In Minnesota we have a new SCORP plan that addresses this. That's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, for you non-DNR sorts. Every state has to create these plans every five years in order to receive federal funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Minnesota's has seven priorities, one of which is “Expand nature-based outdoor recreation experiences for youth living in developed

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T ransforming My Nature Center: A Work in Progress

by Gordon Maupin

As nature center directors, we are leaders. The extinction of experience is an issue where we must lead.

Several years ago I started a journey with The Wilderness Center. At the time I didn't know it would transform me into a warrior against extinction of experience. The journey is not finished. Transforming organizational culture is a slow process. Deep inside, I was not satisfied with our strictly educational mission. More and more we were defining our nature center as a resource for formal education. This was the 1980s and formal education was just beginning to feel the pressure of accountability. I felt something was missing. I knew our organization could be more. My natural history background drew me toward land conservation. The first failed opportunities to conserve land left me feeling impotent. I lacked the skills to grasp opportunities. (See *Directions*, May/June 1994, Vol. 4 No. 3.).

Then I discovered the world of land trusts. A land trust is a nonprofit organization that preserves land. Technically, most nonprofit nature centers are already land trusts. Through the Land Trust Alliance's many training opportunities, I embarked upon a self-education project. I learned how land trusts conserve land through creative, imaginative mechanisms. I determined to expand the mission of The Wilderness Center to include land trust work. Over a period of years, I conducted a sales job on the board, the staff, the membership and the public. It took a few years for my board to accept the idea of a significant expansion of our mission. When an opportunity to accept our first donated conservation easement appeared, the board was ready. The

easement was negotiated and accepted. With the acceptance of a conservation easement, the board changed our mission to specifically include land trust work. I'm not certain they fully realized what they were doing at the time, but the board has remained steadfastly behind land trust work ever since.

In a way it was easy to find land conservation opportunities. All we needed was an adjustment of attitude. With a new attitude, came an adjustment of our mission and how we perceive our organization. It is amazing what a change in attitude will do. Almost by

"A landscape – even a place that is utterly wild – is admired not only for itself, but for its links to previous human experience."

**— Evan Eisenberg
The Ecology of Eden**

itself, this change in attitude created land conservation opportunities. A more entrepreneurial spirit toward land conservation developed among board members. The public has come to expect land conservation activity from The Wilderness Center. In the years following our first conservation easement, we have steadily conserved more and more land. We have many conservation easements completed and many in the works. Our adjustment of attitude has led us to capitalize on opportunities. This in turn created a project to preserve a stream corridor connecting two tracts of land we own.

Land conservation is one means to fight against extinction of experience.

However, it requires yet another adjustment of attitude so that opportunities may be grasped. We need to hold more land where children may have "frequent, positive encounters with nature."

We aren't The Nature Conservancy. We must see the value of waste ground. We need to understand that small urban and suburban plots of land are not liabilities, but are, instead, central to our mission. To actively acquire drainage ditches; steep, unbuildable land; wetlands left behind by developers; vacant lots; and other small urban and suburban waste grounds is a journey our board has not yet made. However it is a journey I am convinced we need to make. And, I am convinced our board will rise to the challenge.

Nature Center leaders need to become familiar with the world of land trusts. Land trusts are exploding in number all across the nation. Land trusts range from tiny organizations working in a single town, to state, regional, and national organizations. What they have in common is a desire to conserve land and a willingness to use creative mechanisms to accomplish that goal. The people working through land trusts are diverse. Many land trusts are run by lawyers. Many employ people trained in government and public policy. The best land trusts move in and out of the halls of government. They know and work with land developers. They are comfortable with farmers, bureaucrats, environmentalists, businessmen, and politicians. Most of all they get things done. They conserve land. They are smart. They have knowledge which people trained in environmental education or natural science find mysterious. Their knowledge is their

Transforming

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power. Their creativity is their power. They are people environmental educators need to know. They are people nature center leaders should become.

The entrepreneurial culture of a land trust is ideal for addressing the extinction of experience. If you cannot add land trust work to your mission, make an alliance with a local land trust. If you don't have a local land trust, consider starting one.

For children to have, as Finch says, "frequent, positive experiences with nature", there must be a place for children to meet nature on their own terms. The place must be convenient. A short bike ride or walk from home is the limit. Your nature center land is not enough. If you designate areas on your nature center where children can play in nature without committing the crimes posted in your rules, you will still only reach a minute number of children. The nature center, the land trust, or both ideally should own land in dozens of neighborhoods. We all need to see the value in a weedy, banked drainage ditch. Such a place may be an eyesore to some, but it can be a place of high adventure to an eight-year-old. It can be a place where a little boy or girl forges a lifelong bond with nature. 🌿

Frequent

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areas through 'near-by' access to the natural world." One of the six suggested action steps is "Establish numerous neighborhood-scale natural areas for unstructured exploration and play." This is still new, and it doesn't guarantee funding or implementation of such sites – but it's a size 14 foot in the door, and the 30 or so people on Minnesota's SCORP Advisory Committee all bought into it. People like us can serve on those Advisory Committees. I did; you can too!

Where else might we go with this small-scale approach to nature play areas? Apartment courtyards, church grounds, corporate parks, commercial preschools, arboreta and botanical gardens, and yes, even nature centers. Plus one of my favorite potentials is "new urbanism" housing developments, which typically include open space and target just the sort of young families that might even pay a little extra for ready access to a nature play area.

The possible sites are many; the potential impact is huge. Seems like a pretty reasonable thing to start working on. 🌿



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– John Burroughs

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