
Beyond *The Lorax*? The Greening of the American Curriculum

Getting children outside to play and stay in touch with nature is important for their health and for developing environmental awareness.

By Clare Lowell



It's not too much of a stretch to say that, if children don't care about nature today, they won't care about conserving it tomorrow when they're adults.

There is a classic *Peanuts* cartoon that features little yellow-haired Sally, ensconced in a bean-bag chair, watching TV, telling big brother Charlie Brown that he should check out the enthralling program she's watching on the tube. "You should watch this," she urges. "They're showing pictures of huge snowflakes falling gently on this beautiful snow covered meadow..."

Charlie Brown looks at the TV and tells her, "You can see the same thing right now if you go outside," pointing out the window. The final frame shows Sally — clearly appalled and momentarily distracted from her TV viewing — exclaiming in horror, "OUTSIDE?!"

It might be funnier if it weren't so scarily true: Our children are growing up without nature — clearly preferring their electronic diversions to the real thing.

What Sally didn't know at the time is that, not only is there a name for her affliction, it's a syndrome that is virtually dominating the younger generation. "Videophilia," defined as the new human tendency to focus on sedentary activities involving electronic me-

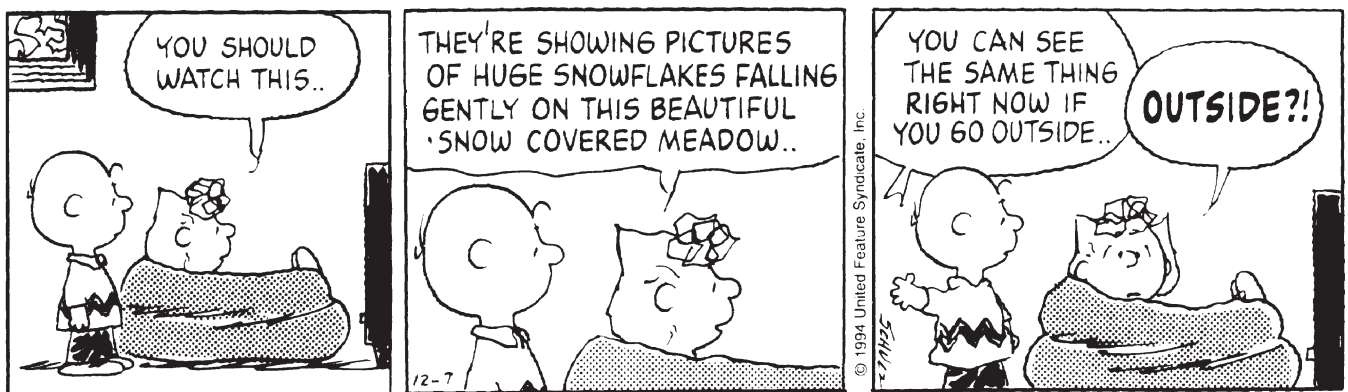
dia,¹ has virtually supplanted the need for "biophilia," or the urge to affiliate with other forms of life. This particular theory is bolstered by research that supports the positive reaction of people to natural landscapes. The quality of this exposure affects human health and child development at an almost cellular level.²

As recently as a generation ago, playtime usually meant outdoor play and activity that put children in touch with nature and encouraged direct involvement with their physical environment. Now chat rooms, video games, and indoor playdates occupy much of their playtime. Playrooms as opposed to playgrounds; virtual nature as opposed to the real thing.

CARING ABOUT NATURE

It's not too much of a stretch to say that, if children don't care about nature today, they won't care about conserving it tomorrow when they're adults. And, if one doesn't care about something, there will be no investment in protecting it. In addition, with most of the populace living in urban areas, people will be even more disconnected from the natural world. Considering the looming environmental issues that await this generation (climate change, population/human consumption, carbon footprints, etc.), this creates a

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downright depressing, if not apocalyptic, view of the future.

Richard Louv's recent bestseller, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, discusses the "criminalization of natural play," in which communities, more concerned with property values and lawsuits, have outlawed unstructured outdoor nature play.³ From public government to community associations, rules govern and restrict children in everything from building tree houses to erecting basketball hoops. When climbing a tree on public land can be actionable as an illegal activity designed to "injure" the landscape, children move indoors to recreate, electronically, what they are missing in real life. As recently as this past summer, teenagers who turned public land in Greenwich, Connecticut, into a Wiffle® ball field were threatened with litigation and unending complaints by locals who wanted them out. In the words of one Wiffle®-ball athlete, "People think we should be home playing 'Grand Theft Auto.'"⁴

Whether this can be attributed to a shrinkage of open space (thereby encouraging overuse of the accessible natural areas) or the overstructuring of childhood, a generation of American children is being raised indoors. From 1977 to 2003, the proportion of 9- to 12-year-olds who engage in outside activities such as hiking, walking, fishing, beach play, and gardening has declined by 50%. In addition, children's free play time in a typical week has declined by a total of nine hours over a 25-year period.⁵

While this physical restriction of childhood may be an unintended outgrowth of an urban society, there may be correspondingly unintended consequences as a result. As nature deficit grows, so does the increase of childhood disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and obesity.⁶ In a series of studies designed to explore potential new treatments for ADHD, the inclusion of after-school and weekend activities centered on natural outdoor environments may be widely effective in reducing symptoms of the disorder. The advantages of these relatively simplistic approaches are many: They are widely accessible, inexpensive, non-stigmatizing, and free of side effects.⁷

And, lest one think that children in rural areas are immune from the urban blight of constricted space and diminished play, studies demonstrate otherwise. While adults may delight in idyllic country life images of open fields, green pastures, and limitless opportunity for play, nothing could be further from the reality of today's youth. Images of *Lassie* aside, most rural children are in the same sedentary boat as their urban

counterparts: inside, in front of a screen. Statistics reflect this, with 16.5% of rural kids qualifying as obese, compared with 14.4% of urban kids (according to a 2003 National Survey of Children's Health). In many ways, they are more disadvantaged than their suburban counterparts because their homes may not be near areas suitable for play and often lack a support system for activity. According to David Hartley, director of the Maine Rural Health Center, children living in isolated communities tend to have fewer places to walk and play. In addition, they also suffer from decreased opportunities to buy healthy foods (a situation often referred to as "nutritional isolation"), an ironic twist on the fresh-air-and-good-food misconception most Americans have of country life.⁸

In addition to a high-fat, high-calorie daily menu, other factors contribute to this situation. American homes have become high-def, Web-enabled, TiVo-driven entertainment meccas that offer 24-hour-a-day diversion from anything that would get a kid out of his or her rocker lounge chair. After a full day at a school desk, the American child comes home to spend, on average, three or more sedentary hours in front of some kind of screen. What's worse, school budgets have slashed physical education programs in cost-cutting moves that have resulted in plummeting participation in daily physical education — down to 25% from 42% 17 years ago.⁹

VISION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

So what's a school board/principal/teacher to do? Throw away our old classroom science kits and take the kids out to play? Close.

Recent proposals, such as the Vision for Environmental Education in Ontario, Canada, promote innovative programs and partnerships with community-based environmental organizations as well as outdoor education centers. In doing so, the Canadian Ministry of Education is offering a vision for environmental education that provides a context for applying knowledge and skills to real-world situations through an integrated approach. Their science curriculum embraces education for sustainability as well as outdoor education. Consequently, students are afforded opportunities for experiential learning that foster connections to local places, develop a greater understanding of ecosystems, and supply a unique context for learning.¹⁰

Closer to home, the Open Spaces program of the Urban Resources Initiative (under the aegis of Yale University) is on the same track. Open Spaces bal-

ances classroom learning on key ecological concepts with outdoor experiences that bring these ideas to life. Whether students are identifying trees and habitats in a schoolyard or connecting human history to the environment, this program opens kids' eyes to nature in the city and teaches them how to protect urban resources.¹¹

Regardless of the worldwide location — be it New Haven or New South Wales — the objectives of enlightened environmental education policies are predictably consistent: to create eco-schools in coordination with a holistic, participatory approach through a combination of learning and action. Raising awareness through inspiring and motivating students is integral to comprehensive program design.

THE LORAX

Which brings us to *The Lorax*. Theodore Seuss Geisel, a.k.a. "Dr. Seuss," created this celebrated story almost 40 years ago, but its prescient message is as timely today as though it were written during the last election cycle. In it, Dr. Seuss introduces the "Once-ler," who cuts down the beautiful truffula trees so that he can use their bright-colored, silky tufts to knit "thneeds." The blissful world of happy "Brown Barba-loots," who play in the shade of the trees and eat their fruits, is destroyed by the factory built by the

Once-ler and the Super Axe Hacker, who cuts down four trees at a time. Enter the Lorax, who speaks up in defense of the trees, animals, air, and water that the Once-ler is destroying in pursuit of bigger and bigger profits. Finally, when the last truffula tree is cut down, production of the thneeds ends. Closed factories, polluted air, polluted water, and an uninhabitable wasteland are all that remains. The Lorax can no longer live there, but he leaves a small pile of rocks on which the word "UNLESS" is inscribed:

"But now," says the Once-ler,
"Now that you're here,
The word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear.
UNLESS someone like you
Cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get
better.
It's not."¹²

What's left, ultimately, is one last truffula seed and the hope that the forest will come back, bringing with it the Lorax and all of his friends.

The basic message of *The Lorax* deals with ecosystems and the interrelatedness of all parts — living and non-living — as a viable, functioning unit. Environmental impact is told from a simplistic yet environmentally accurate viewpoint, demonstrating the conflict between natural resources and man-made production. The characters articulate the frustration felt by those who are at the mercy of big business and short-sighted economic goals, particularly the Lorax, who addresses the Once-ler directly:

"Mister!" he said with a sawdusty sneeze,
"I am the Lorax, I speak for the trees.
I speak for the trees, for the trees have no
tongues.
And I'm asking you, sir, at the top of my lungs"

—
he was very upset as he shouted and puffed —
"What's that *THING* you've made out of my Truffula tuft?"¹³

This fable of reckless deforestation and its dire ecological consequence was an outgrowth of the environmental reform movement of the 1960s, which peaked with the nation's first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. Issues of the day were presented in a means that allowed children to equate the ideas in the story with real, present-day situations.¹⁴

For years, teachers have used *The Lorax* to help students understand the need for conservation as well as

the effects of lifestyle changes that will result from the thoughtless devastation of the natural world.

And yet, there is an environmental movement that goes beyond the obvious message. The interrelatedness of environmental education and the reconnection of children with nature are at the heart of both. Perhaps the message should be, “Heal the globe, and you heal yourself.”

Conservation will fail unless it is better connected to people, and people start out as children who need to revere their connection to nature from a personal, rather than intellectual, viewpoint. And so we must bridge the rhetoric/reality gap between conservation for its own sake and conservation for the sake of the health and well-being of our children.

Dr. Seuss rhymes aside, how do we cast as wide a net as possible in capturing the imagination of children in inspiring them to become an active part of their ecological environment? Is it something that can be legislated, or is it an intangible passion that can only be appreciated through firsthand experience? Actually, research suggests both.

NO CHILD LEFT INSIDE

To address the problems voiced here, the No Child Left Inside Coalition — a broad-based organization of more than 200 member groups throughout the U. S. — has focused its efforts on legislation that would authorize new funding for states to provide high-quality, environmental instruction. The No Child Left Inside Act (NCLLI) would provide subsidies to support outdoor learning activities both at school and in non-formal environmental education centers, teacher training, and the creation of state environmental literacy plans.¹⁵

The intersection between healthy people and a

healthy environment is critical to the future of youngsters everywhere, yet the movement to reconnect children with nature is still in its infancy. The retreat indoors is not only limiting to the next generation, it's downright dangerous. Public health workers already see the effects in fatter, sicker children whose life expectancy is alarmingly shorter than that of their parents. As the American Public Health Association notes in its publication, *The Nation's Health*, “The future . . . is in the hands of today's children, many of whom are more likely to view nature through the screen of a television rather than the netted screen of a camping tent.”¹⁶

Which brings us back to little Sally Brown, still in her bean-bag chair, still watching nature on TV. Take note, little yellow-haired girl: Get up, put on your mittens, and go out and play in the snow. Your future depends on it.

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