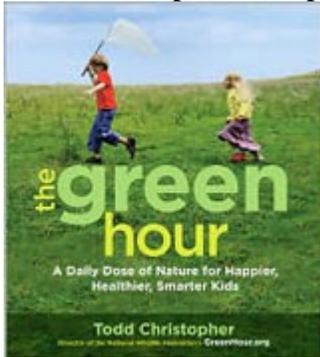


Not our nature to be removed from nature

Todd Christopher | Apr. 17, 2010



Somewhere around the age of 5, my son became fascinated by the concept of a time that existed before he did. He had somehow stumbled upon the word old-fashioned and rather charmingly began to apply it to anything and everything that obviously predated the world as he knows it: steam engines, antique cars, Victorian houses. Perhaps not quite as charming, at least to my wife and me, was when he would point to family photos from when we were wee children and explain to all who would hear that these, too, were artifacts from the old-fashioned days.

Our feigned indignation and slightly bruised egos aside, those images, just a generation old, capture a basic truth. The world we knew as children is not the same world today's children know. In some ways, the disparities are simply the benign indicators that progress marches on. For children who have known only mobile phones and digital music players in their lifetime, rotary phones and record players are relics that reveal as many similarities as they do differences between us.

But what worries me -- and, I believe, a growing number of parents, caregivers and concerned adults -- is the extent to which childhood itself has undergone fundamental changes in that relatively short time.

Only a generation ago, kids spent long days fully engaged in outdoor play and discovery. Curiosity was our guide, wonder our reward. Our minds and bodies were engaged, our senses alive. We interacted with the world around us -- learning about it, and ourselves, in the process -- and were endlessly challenged and delighted by doing so.

I'm not simply romanticizing an idyllic childhood. I grew up in a place -- perhaps you did, too -- remarkable only for being unremarkable; it lay equidistant between city and wilderness, without being either. But even that place was more than adequately endowed with the landscape of childhood: dirt and stone, grass and trees, butterflies and birds, flowers and bees. And while we certainly cherished our own diversions and distractions, it was not within our nature to be removed from nature. A glorious day would begin with the bang of a door shutting behind us and would luxuriously unfurl to the languid evening, until the streetlights came on and we, at last, would return home.

That all has changed. We have reached the point where the children of today spend significantly less time at play outdoors than the previous generation. And when they do go outdoors it is less frequently, and for

markedly shorter periods of time. University of Maryland researchers have found that outdoor and nature-based activities -- from walking to camping -- now comprise less than one-half hour per week of a child's time. And even though many parents recognize the benefits of outdoor time for their children -- and themselves -- we are nonetheless in the midst of a generation-long shift away from nature-based recreation as a whole.

At the same time, several alarming and interrelated trends have emerged. Children have increasingly withdrawn from the fundamental and formative experiences of nature in their own neighborhoods, leading lives more sedentary, more structured, and more saturated by media than their parents, as children, did. Not coincidentally, the rates of childhood obesity have risen dramatically, attention-deficit and emotional disorders have been diagnosed with alarming frequency, and the virtual world presented on a screen has become more meaningful to young people than the natural world right outside their doors.



The lack of real, direct experience in and with nature has caused many children to regard the

natural world as mere abstraction, that fantastic, beautifully filmed place rife with endangered rainforests and polar bears in peril. This hyperbolic, often fictionalized version of nature is no more real -- and yet no less real -- to them than the everyday nature right outside their doors, waiting to be discovered in a child's way, at a child's pace.

Consider the University of Cambridge study that found that a group of 8-year-old children was able to identify substantially more Pokemon characters than common wildlife species. One wonders whether our children's inherent capacity to recognize, classify and order information about their environment -- abilities once essential to our very survival -- is slowly devolving to facilitate life in their increasingly virtualized world. It's all a part of what Robert Pyle first called "the extinction of experience."

This should ring alarm bells for parents and caregivers, because that direct experience in nature, we now understand, is nothing short of vital to our children's intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual development. Mounting research demonstrates that, at this most critical time in life, interaction with nature affords children the pleasurable multisensory experiences that challenge their minds, invigorate their bodies, restore their spirits and sharpen their focus. It is perhaps a parent's first and best medicine for addressing that trio of decidedly modern maladies endemic to childhood today: obesity, attention deficit and media addiction. ...

[A] growing body of research clearly indicates what parents have known for generations -- that time outdoors is essential to the healthy development of young minds, bodies and spirits. The studies point to the problems invited by children and youth leading a lifestyle disconnected from nature -- as well as the intellectual, physical and psychological benefits to be enjoyed by those given the chance to explore, to play in -- simply to spend time in -- the natural world.

But knowing does not necessarily mean doing. Many parents today -- even those who enjoyed a childhood full of nature play and discovery themselves -- now raise children who are overscheduled, overexposed to media, and essentially disconnected from the natural world in any meaningful way. And we now see the first wave of parents who themselves missed out on those formative experiences and opportunities to learn and grow in nature; consequently, they do not have them to draw upon now as they raise children of their own.

Fortunately, this is a challenge that all families can tackle together, and one with a solution that benefits children and parents alike: reclaiming a "green hour" a day for play and discovery in the natural world. And that natural world begins right outside your door; it doesn't matter whether you spend time in a wilderness setting or in your own backyard -- a valuable experience can be had in both. A green hour is simply a time for families to unplug, unwind and recharge as they reconnect to the natural world -- and to each other. It is an opportunity for parents to strengthen family bonds as they guide the natural experiences that foster happier, healthier, smarter children.

[Todd Christopher is creator of the GreenHour.org, an online resource of the National Wildlife Federation. This article was an excerpt from *The Green Hour: A Daily Dose of Nature for Happier, Healthier and Smarter Kids*, published by arrangement with Trumpeter, an imprint of Shambhala Publications Inc. (www.shambhala.com).]

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