

## **Nature Deficit Disorder**

Taking part in a discussion group comprised of parents, one mother answers a question about her children and the outdoors, "It was a perfect, quiet day, the kids are skiing down the mountain, and they've got their headphones on. They can't enjoy just hearing nature and being out there alone. They can't make their own entertainment. They have to bring something with them."

One boy, a fourth-grader said that he liked to play indoors because that's where all the electrical outlets are, and a number of children expressed that their parents were afraid of letting them play in the woods. Some parents simply believe that nature is no longer available.

A century ago, historian Frederick Jackson Turner announced that the American frontier had ended. His thesis is debated to this day but a similar thesis is currently being considered, is society coaching children out of nature? Well-meaning parents and schools scare children from the woods, urban development has taken its toll on open spaces, natural history and zoology are giving way to disciplines such as microbiology and genetic engineering, and kids spend more time plugged into an electrical device than they do feeling the sun on their faces. Summer camp, as Richard Louv puts it, has become computer camp.

Louv gave a name to the phenomena, calling it Nature-Deficit Disorder. It's not recognized as a clinical condition, but as young people spend less time in nature, their senses narrow, physiologically and psychologically, and the richness of their human experience is greatly diminished. At the same time growing research links mental, physical and spiritual health to association with nature. "As one scientist puts it, we can now assume that just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature," says Louv.

Evidence to support the concept is growing and comes from every scientific discipline. Howard Gardener a professor of education at Harvard developed a theory of multiple intelligences in 1983. Arguing that the traditional notion of IQ was myopic, he proposed seven kinds of 'smart.' These included word-smart (linguistic intelligence), number/reasoning-smart (mathematical intelligence), image-smart (spatial intelligence), body-smart (kinesthetic intelligence), music-smart, people-smart (interpersonal intelligence) and self-smart (intrapersonal intelligence).

More recently he added nature-smart (naturalist intelligence), the core of this being the ability to recognize plants and animals, and other parts of the natural environment. Hunters, botanists, anatomists for example excel at this, but it is suggested that this has been hijacked, society has instead become proficient at distinguishing between cars, sneakers and digital devices.

In reading the above it will become evident that change will only come through a multi-pronged approach that relies on public education, policy, programs and parental leadership with the latter perhaps being the most important.

It will be apparent that hidden-corner.org not only facilitates outdoor play, as many programs do, but that we also use structured environmental lessons. This on it's own will not necessarily address NDD but we have thrown our weight behind the wheel. We not only want to address NDD but we want to give kids and families the opportunity and means to connect to nature. We believe that outdoor recreation is one of the very best ways of doing this.

Hiking, biking and kayaking, rambles and reserve visits, along with nature journaling, family time and unstructured play is the Geoeducation method. With that in mind we developed an easily executed and achievable program that would engage participants for a year, in the process ushering families and student groups out of doors. One activity a month for twelve months (we have about 30 activities listed), might be enough to connect a child, a family or a class to nature for life.