



Help Shrink Nature Deficit

Written by: GEF Staff

Cultural changes are often imperceptible, occurring slowly over generations, accumulating through smaller, seemingly unrelated events. We rarely think of ourselves as living through these changes. Yet looking back, the past is clearly very different from the present. There are obvious signs of this type of metamorphosis such as fashion, language and pastimes. But there are also more subtle evolutions. For instance, think of the way children live, learn and play today compared to just a generation ago.



It's natural to romanticize the past. Childhood, in particular, is vulnerable to accumulating a joyful patina as it recedes further into memory. Yet stating certain truths about what has happened cannot be blamed on nostalgia. Children are spending more and more time indoors and less time engaging with nature on its own terms. This is a quantifiable phenomenon and one that is also readily apparent with a variety of causes. Individually they fail to convince, who would naturally connect suburban zoning decisions with childhood obesity, or a rise in lawsuits with ADHD, but seen together they cohere into a recognizable pattern that has altered the behaviour and consciousness of our youth.

Author Richard Louv describes this disconnect as 'nature deficit disorder.' In his book "Last Child in the Woods," he presents a persuasive case as to the importance of nature to a child's physical and emotional well-being. More and more research is being conducted connecting various childhood and adolescent maladies to a sedentary, restricted and unimaginative lifestyle.

For instance, technology is one powerful influence. Cable television, computers, video games, portable music players are all prominent features in a young person's life. This is not to say these things are inherently bad or should be shunned. However, when these pursuits come at the exclusion of all else something valuable is lost.

Though Louv called this a 'disorder' that is slightly misleading, it is not a disorder in the sense the word is used in popular culture. It is not genetic; it can't be addressed by pharmacology or therapy. Nor does it imply any particular deficiency on the part of any individual. Rather, it merely describes alienation between humans and nature, an estrangement in a relationship that has existed since the beginning of time, and one that threatens to make us all poorer if it continues to degenerate.

However, the cure is simple. We need to reintroduce this generation to nature. Not simply in a structured classroom setting but in a pure, natural way. We must allow kids to romp freely through the woods, jump streams, catch frogs and return home covered in mud. This is a joy that's being denied them as we succumb to a media-fuelled fear: fear of crime, of injury, of bugs, plants and predators. Fear undoubtedly has made our children safer but at what cost and how will a purely 'safe' childhood serve them as adults? We can accomplish this change in a variety of ways but it requires altering an ingrained mentality and sloughing off conventional wisdom regarding some aspects of childhood and child rearing. It will require the participation of parents, teachers, the community and even the children themselves.

Green Education Foundation (GEF) was founded with this cause in mind. We see this deficit as a tremendous opportunity to change the way kids live, learn and play for the better. By designing and



promoting ways in which children can both learn *about* nature and learn *in* nature then they will be much more inclined to *preserve* nature.

To help in combating nature deficit, GEF is launching the largest youth based gardening initiative of all time during the **Green Thumb Challenge**, calling on schools and groups to plant 10,000 gardens in 2010. Register by Dec. 15, 2009 and be entered into a raffle for garden kits for your school or group and be eligible for a \$5000 grant.

Enroll at www.greeneducationfoundation.org for all the details.