

## Our Legacy, Our Responsibility

*By Bill Starr*

*Director New York Division-Forest Fire Lookout Association  
Former New York State forest fire observer-Pillsbury Mountain*

Today a crisis is emerging throughout the United States fewer and fewer people, families and children are utilizing our vast outdoor recreational facilities. As less children have a positive introduction to the wilderness the future leaders of our country will lack a bond and appreciation of not only preserving what we have set aside, but they will lack an understanding of proper conservation and the principles of a renewable resource.

Author Richard Louv points out these dangers in his book Last Child in the Woods; saving our children from natural deficit disorder. (ISBN 1565123913 April 2005). Many factors play into this situation; parents' fear of having a safe outlet for their children to enjoy, more and more places are being regulated to discourage exploration and the technology available to our children. Families have precious little free time and the trend today is for outdoor educational opportunities to be posted on event calendars. This is all well and good, but what if personal schedules do not match with scheduled events? An all too familiar situation and the children end up on the short end of the stick.

At the disposal of the New York state government is a single instrument with a 97 year history of having a tremendously positive impression on the public and the best thing is that they are available on any day at any time. Although the fire towers were created for a single purpose they had evolved into facilities that served many functions beyond fire detection. Who has ever left a fire tower visit without a smile on their face?

Anyone of us who has worked in the fire towers, and the people on duty today, are *Ambassadors* of wise conservation and the teachings on the principals of a renewable resource. The fire towers also offer a family activity and the healthy opportunity to get out and exercise. If it's not a family outing it may be as a Girl Scout or Boy Scout trip.

The Forest Fire Lookout Association is promoting restoration of fire towers and lookouts across the country. This should also be seen as an opportunity for educating of our children in the wise use and preservation of our great outdoors. If a person is lucky enough someone may be on duty. Who better than a forest fire observer to charm a child's imagination and humor them with their unique personalities and stories. Children are a captive audience full of questions and eager to learn. Does anyone remember "Smokey Bear"? We must aggressively promote our fire towers and encourage everyone to come and visit.



*Bill Starr with a group from the Canada Lake  
Protective Association youth group.  
August 27, 2005  
Kane Mountain fire tower*



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**Special Health Report**

## Mother Nature: Raising healthier kids

**Getting your kids back in touch with the great outdoors can improve their health and well-being.**

Recess, soccer practice, the neighborhood playground -- all are great avenues for getting our kids up and out. But when it comes to their mental as well as physical well-being, children need something else, something elemental: They need nature. So says a new

school of thought that is gaining notice by children's medical and mental health experts. Supporters assert that, for a child, a deep forest or sprawling parkland can be the best playground ever.

Author Richard Louv's groundbreaking book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. In addition to writing, he advocates for children, serving as the chairman of the Children & Nature Network.

from Nature-Deficit Disorder, has been a catalyst for kick-starting the movement. Louv's new book also gives a name to what he says is a troubling disconnect between today's children and the great outdoors: "nature-deficit disorder."

Blame it on shrinking green space, overscheduling by families -- whatever the reason, the result is limiting the potential of today's young people, Louv says. He brings together anecdotal evidence gathered from years of traveling the United States and talking to kids, as well as the most comprehensive research on nature and its benefits. He concludes that the absence of nature in many children's lives is key when it comes to problems they increasingly face, such as obesity, attention disorders, depression and stress. Louv posits that exposure to nature can help

**MEET OUR EXPERTS**

**Tedd Mitchell, M.D.**

In addition to dispensing medical advice every week in USA WEEKEND's HealthSmart column, Mitchell is president, medical director and staff physician at the Cooper Clinic in Dallas. He is also a member of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.



**Martha Farrell Erickson, Ph.D.**

Erickson is director of the Irving B. Harris Programs (Center for Early Education and Development) at the University of Minnesota. She also writes a syndicated weekly newspaper column on parenting.



**Richard Louv**

Louv is the author of seven books, including the best-selling "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder." In addition to writing, he advocates for children, serving as the chairman of the Children & Nature Network.



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prevent these ills and enhance our children's academic and emotional growth.

"Although we don't yet have a wealth of rigorous, controlled studies that allow us to make a definitive statement about cause and effect, we do have a variety of studies that collectively point to an association between outdoor play and an array of good outcomes for kids," says Martha Erickson, Ph.D., a children's mental health expert and senior fellow and professor at the University of Minnesota. (See "The Outside Advantage" on the next page for some of the latest findings.)

Over the years, the hours that children spend playing outside can pay off when it comes to physical, intellectual and social development. Yet, such valuable interaction is fleeting these days. From 1997 to 2003, there was a 50% drop in kids who participated in outdoor activities such as hiking, walking and fishing, according to a University of Maryland study.

Erickson and Louv, who both are active in the Children & Nature Network, which seeks to raise awareness about the importance of nature in kids' lives, say that even time-pressed families and city dwellers can find places that fit the bill. And lawmakers are listening, too. Some states, including

Connecticut, California and Maine, have launched initiatives to get more young people outdoors. And on the federal level, the pending No Child Left Inside Act seeks to provide new funding for environmental education.

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**"Kids who play in natural areas -- those with bushes and trees -- have been shown to engage in more creative and cooperative play."--**

Richard Louv

**To find out more, USA WEEKEND Magazine recently assembled Louv, Erickson and USA WEEKEND's HealthSmart columnist, Dr. Tedd Mitchell, to discuss why parents need to get their children back in touch with the natural world around them.**

**Richard, we've known for a while that kids don't get outdoors enough. Why the clinical-sounding label for this problem?**

**Louv:** "Nature-deficit disorder" captures people's attention. We know it's not a medical condition, but it helps to stamp a name on something serious that families are struggling with.

**Why is it so important for parents to address this now?**

**Louv:** Because the situation is getting worse. The Nature Conservancy found that kids under 13 now take part in freestyle play outdoors for only a half-hour a week. Look, I'll plead guilty to being nostalgic for my childhood, when I interacted with nature for hours each day. But there is now more documentation that the trend of decreased outdoor activity is growing and having a negative impact on children's physical and mental health.

**Erickson:** Obviously, when they are outdoors, children are more physically active than they would be in front of a TV. And, once they get outside, they can't get enough exploration, which is good for their minds.

**Tedd, does this disconnect from nature show up in patients you treat?**

**Mitchell:** My practice is made up primarily of adult city dwellers, so I do see a disproportionate number whose only exposure to nature is the Saturday morning trip to the golf course. In fact, many of my patients question whether or not they really need a tetanus booster. That's because they are rarely outside!

**Kids are being pushed to excel inside and outside of the classroom. And parents often feel like kids need a reward after all that -- often some stress-free "crash" time indoors. How can we squeeze in time for nature?**

**Louv:** We realize this is something many families deal with. But they can start by not perceiving an interaction with nature as just one more chore. Why can't that be the reward for a stressful day?

**"If you can't get to a pond or lake, then find a puddle." -- Dr. Tedd Mitchell**

**To get kids outside, parents have to overcome their fears. In one study, more than four out of five moms cited crime and safety concerns as key reasons to keep their kids indoors. Yet by 2002, violent crimes against young people had fallen well below 1975 levels. So why do we still imagine all kinds of evil "out there"?**

**Louv:** That's because of the increased perception of violence. Anytime something happens in the woods, it gets intense media coverage.

**Mitchell:** It's a shame. It used to be "Go outside and play until dinner-time." Now, it's "Go grab a snack and play video games until dinnertime."

**Erickson:** Let's not forget there are ways to incorporate unstructured outdoor play while keeping parents at ease. Nature centers, for example, often have open areas where kids can play and explore, while parents can sit and watch without hovering.

### **The medical community has started to stress the importance of unstructured, self-directed play for healthy child development.**

#### **How does this relate to the back-to-nature movement?**

**Erickson:** I see the agendas as overlapping, but the outdoors movement has additional benefits. Unstructured play, indoors or out, lets children initiate activity, develop problem-solving skills, use their imagination and negotiate with peers. The outdoors, especially green environments, provides a uniquely engaging environment for this type of play.

**Louv:** Kids who play in natural areas -- with bushes and trees instead of blacktop -- have been shown to engage in more creative and cooperative play. That's just one of the value-added benefits.

**Erickson:** And nature piques kids' curiosity, leading to wonderful scientific learning. Plus, there's encouraging research showing that an early connection to nature leads kids to grow up as better stewards of the environment.

### **As Richard notes in "Last Child in the Woods," the obesity epidemic coincides with a record-high increase in organized sports for kids. How does that correlate with the need for more outdoor play?**

**Erickson:** Obesity relates not only to activity level but also to the type and quantity of food we eat. That said, in organized sports, kids often have little actual playtime. But watch a group of children in a wooded area, and you'll see them running, climbing over things, then dashing over to whatever captures their attention next.

**Mitchell:** Last summer, my sons built a fort out of storage pallets and hay at our ranch. That project took them all weekend. They were like beavers, constantly moving back and forth between our barn and the woods. Sports are more about following directions to the letter. They're great for discipline -- and can have mental and physical benefits -- but they don't leave room for the imagination. Kids get bored so easily because they don't have the amount of time we did, when we were young, to just play.

#### **What do parents do if there aren't woods around to play in?**

**Mitchell:** Kids will find fascinating things to explore anywhere. My sister, who lives in Brooklyn, takes her scout den on hikes across a bridge and lets them discover which side of the bridge the moss is growing on. If you can't get to a pond or lake, then find a puddle.

#### **How can parents make sure their kids are making the best use of their outdoor time?**

**Erickson:** They don't have to! It shouldn't be an organized lesson. Left to themselves, kids learn to build a fort or use a log to cross a creek.

**Mitchell:** Building a treehouse or going on a hike is a slow process that requires patience. Computer games teach young people how to think and react quickly. And that's important. But if they learn everything in quick snippets, they'll never learn about the rewards of completing tasks that require a longer-term approach.

**Louv:** The pace of play in nature is self-regulated rather than machine-regulated. The kind of time spent in nature may increase attention span and stimulate the senses.

#### **What kind of time commitment to nature do kids need to make?**

**Louv:** Some time is better than none. More is better than some. Scientifically speaking, we can't pinpoint that yet.

#### **How should families get started?**

**Louv:** It's like beginning to exercise. You don't run a 5K on the first day; you build up to it. Speaking of exercise, how much time are we, as parents, spending on the treadmill indoors? Get the same benefit by taking your kids on a hike.

**Erickson:** Or walk in the neighborhood at night. Take a chair outside after dinner and read on the lawn. Just break the habit of coming home and staying inside for the rest of the day.

**Louv:** You have to take the first step. Nature doesn't have to be Yosemite. Getting in touch with nature doesn't require that you load up your charge card with equipment from REI.

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### THE OUTSIDE ADVANTAGE

Although scientific studies of the effects of nature on child development are still in their infancy, quite a few point to a distinctly positive role. Here's how:

-- **Nature can be a stress reducer.** A 2003 study published in Environment and Behavior concluded that green plants and vistas reduce stress among children in rural areas. The more natural the surroundings, the better: A greater degree of "greenery" around the home was linked to more significant stress reduction.

-- **Nature can make kids more focused.** University of Illinois research found that children with attention-deficit disorder can focus more effectively after outdoor activities such as camping and fishing. Other studies have yielded similar results: Urban kids have shown increased cognitive ability when they have access to natural settings, and Swedish preschoolers who played in more natural settings suffered fewer attention lapses -- being distracted, interrupting, not listening -- than those who played in less natural areas.

-- **Nature can enhance a child's emotional and social development.** If young children have regular opportunities for unstructured play, then they are likely to have a greater chance of getting along with others and being happier, healthier and smarter, report researchers at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Teens also can benefit: A survey of participants in wilderness programs found that their interactions with nature resulted in enhanced self-esteem, independence and initiative.

*Discussion moderated by USA WEEKEND senior writer Dennis McCafferty.*

*Cover and cover story photo illustrations by C.J. Burton for USA WEEKEND*

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