



Building a Movement to Reconnect Children & Nature

March 26, 2010

Director, Office of the Executive Secretariat
US Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW, Room 116-A
Whitten Building
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Members of the Task Force on Childhood Obesity:

On behalf of the Children & Nature Network (C&NN), www.childrenandnature.org, we are pleased to submit comments in response to the Task Force on Childhood Obesity Request for Information. The mission of the Children & Nature Network (C&NN) is to build a worldwide movement to re-connect children and nature—creating social and environmental conditions in which all children will thrive. We are a relatively new non-profit organization, co-founded in 2006 by Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, and others; however, **our work now extends to more than 70 initiatives in more than 40 states throughout the US. Our grassroots, community and state-based leaders report they engaged in the range of 900,000 to 1.5 million children, youth and their families last year alone** as participants in the process of re-connecting children and nature. School and community gardens, nature-based play areas, and nature clubs for families are examples of the results being made available through the leadership of this grassroots network.

Through these and other efforts, C&NN works to help reverse the trends that disconnect children in urban, suburban and rural areas from direct experience with and in nature. As members of the Task Force likely know, this deficit has been linked to increased childhood obesity, diabetes, depression, attention disorders and lack of hope. This disconnect is prevalent among all economic groups, all racial and ethnic groups, and in all geographic settings—rural, suburban and urban—throughout the United States as well as other parts of the world. **Research indicates that children who have direct connections with nature in their everyday lives tend to be healthier, happier and smarter, more resilient, more creative and more collaborative. Including a direct connection to nature as part of the work of the Task Force will go a long way to facilitating the social change necessary to achieve the goal of solving the challenge of childhood obesity within a generation.**

We applaud the Task Force's four objectives: 1) ensuring access to healthy affordable food; 2) increasing physical activity in schools and communities; 3) providing healthier food in schools; and 4) empowering parents with information and tools to make good choices for themselves and

their families. **Our overall recommendation is to add direct experiences in and with nature as a means by which to more effectively achieve these objectives—with the ultimate goal, in this case, to reverse the trend toward childhood obesity.**

We have not responded to all 16 questions that have been included in the joint request for comments. However, we have addressed the following.

Question 1 asks, for each of the four objectives described above, what key topics should be addressed in the report? Specific to objective 1) ensuring access to healthy affordable food, one of the most effective ways to achieve this goal and simultaneously improve children's overall health and well-being, is to **work with partners to encourage, support and maintain community and school gardens. Children are physically active when participating in planting, caring for, and harvesting nutritious garden foods. Research indicates there are mental health, cognitive, stress-reduction, physical and other benefits associated with gardening.** Specific to objective 2) increasing physical activity in schools and communities, **we encourage an emphasis on nearby nature in all communities, and we encourage an approach to school curricula that brings nature into the classroom and the classroom into nature. Such an integrated ecological approach contributes to improved academic test scores while also contributing substantially to children's healthy development.**

Specific to objective 3, providing healthier food in schools, as stated above, school gardening programs will assist, as will partnerships with organic farmers' markets and other organic and healthy food growing groups. The Center for Ecoliteracy has an outstanding new book, *Smart by Nature*, that provides excellent case studies for how to improve children's access to healthier food in their schools, while also part of the school's curriculum. Specific to 4) empowering parents with information and tools to make good choices for themselves and their families, **the Children & Nature Network emphasizes low-cost and no-cost remedies for getting children and their families outdoors in nature.** One of those is what we call Nature Clubs for Families. A free and downloadable tool kit is available on our web site in both English and Spanish, at www.childrenandnature.org. We also recommend the web site of an organization we co-founded, Nature Rocks, www.naturerocks.org. It provides a host of easily accessible ideas and resources for families to get outdoors in nature. Partners include the Children & Nature Network, ecoAmerica, REI, The Nature Conservancy, American Heart Association, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and American Camp Association.

Question 5 asks, for each of the four objectives, what strategies will ensure that efforts taken by all of the entities mentioned above reach across geographic areas and to diverse racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and geographic groups, including children who are at the highest risk of obesity and children with disabilities? The issue of children's disconnect from nature as a part of direct experience in their everyday lives is an issue that affects children in all geographic areas—rural, suburban and urban; in all income groups; and among all racial and ethnic groups. **Research commissioned by the Children & Nature Network, to be released in April 2010, indicates that families with low-income and low educational achievement are less likely than those with higher income and higher academic achievement to see the benefits to children's health and well-being from direct experience with nature in children's everyday lives.** Further, African American, Latino and Asian/Pacific Islanders are less likely to see the cognitive,

emotional and social benefits, as well as the physical benefits, for children's healthy development than are Caucasian/White and First Nations/Native Americans. **To achieve all four objectives, targeted communication, mentoring, and increased and improved access needs to be especially focused on low-income communities of color, where often the greatest number of obese and overweight children are living and going to school.**

Question 16 asks, What other input should the Task Force consider in writing the report? The following has been written by Richard Louv, noted above as author of the best-selling book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, and co-founder and Chairman of the non-profit organization, the Children & Nature Network. This is excerpted from a recent of Rich's blogs, available at www.childrenandnature.org:

"It's important to acknowledge that the greatest increase in child obesity in our history occurred during the same decades as the greatest increase in organized sports for children. Soccer is good, and part of an overall solution, but we do need a wider array of approaches—including a greater focus on nature experience, and better message framing. A growing body of research has linked nature experience and 'green exercise' to surprisingly broad and special benefits, including more likelihood of physical activity, greater use of the imagination and the senses, enhanced ability to focus, stress reduction, and cognitive advantages. Researchers in England and Sweden have found that joggers who exercise in a natural green setting with trees, foliage, and landscape views, feel more restored, and less anxious, angry, and depressed than people who burn the same amount of calories in gyms or other built settings. Green exercise not only adds value to physical movement, it's less expensive than joining a gym.

"We believe that natural areas . . . are places where children are most likely to gain the benefits of both unstructured play and the gifts of nature, and should be seen as fundamental to addressing child obesity. Making sure that urban neighborhoods have sidewalks for walking is important. But so is the provision of nearby nature.

"An important study published in 2008 has pointed to a relationship between child obesity and nearby nature: **the greener the neighborhood, the lower the Body Mass Index of children — regardless of a neighborhood's population density.** The researchers from the Indiana University School of Medicine, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, and the University of Washington, examined the medical records of three- to sixteen-year- old children that lived in Marion County, Indiana. 'Previous work, including our own, has provided snap shots in time, and shown that **for children in densely populated cities, the greener the neighborhood, the lower the risk of obesity.** Our new study of over 3,800 inner city children revealed that living in areas with green space has a long term positive impact on children's weight and thus health,' said Gilbert C. Liu, M.D., senior author of the study which appears in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

"That's good news for those who believe that changing the built environment for inner city kids is just as important as attempts to change family behavior—and possibly more important.

"Clearly, the causes and solutions of obesity are complex, and there are no magic bullets. But as the society moves toward solutions, it would be useful to focus on nature experience at two levels. First we need more research on the impact of the

natural world on child development and health. Second, growing public concern about the disconnect between children and nature can serve as a strong organizing tool to increase public awareness and action regarding child obesity. To many adults, particularly those who are overweight themselves, the topic of child obesity, *per se*, may be an abstract and uncomfortable issue to confront. Progress may be especially slow in states where the majority of the adult populations are overweight or obese. But people of all sizes and political points of view can relate to the fact that so many children are missing out on the gifts of nature. Therefore, **the children and nature movement has a special utility on the child obesity front.**

“Fear is a barrier. But there’s more than one way to get kids outside playing in nature. The United Kingdom has taken the lead on proposing that families meet together in ‘green gyms’ to take hikes, restore urban streams, garden, and pursue other nature-oriented activities. Australia is also doing a good job on this front. In the U.S., the Children & Nature Network is promoting Family Nature Clubs, through which families decide to meet for green exercise and nature adventures. Fifty-nine clubs have emerged in recent months, some of them with memberships of several hundred families each. What if that idea caught on, just as book clubs did in past decades?”

The Children & Nature Network applauds the First Lady’s “Let’s Move” campaign. As part of the campaign, and the work of this important Task Force on Childhood Obesity, we urge even more focus on independent play and the natural world.

Please contact us for additional information. We welcome and appreciate the opportunity to comment.

Sincere regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cheryl Charles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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