



Natural Leaders: *A Brief History of the Children and Nature Movement*

by Richard Louv

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Sometimes, giving a name to a dream helps bring that dream to life. In April 2006, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., I called for a nationwide “Leave No Child Inside” movement. The event, moderated by Children & Nature Network (C&NN) President and CEO Cheryl Charles, and sponsored by the Paul F-Brandwein Institute, had assembled more than 100 conservation, education and government organizations with a continuing commitment to reducing the nature deficit.

Today, a little more than a year after the Press Club event, public awareness may have reached a tipping point. For decades, environmental educators, conservationists, and others have worked, often heroically, to introduce more children to nature — usually with inadequate support from policy-makers. But a number of recent trends — including the unexpected national media attention given *Last Child in the Woods* and “nature-deficit disorder” — have brought the concerns of these veteran advocates before a broader audience. The World Future Society now ranks nature-deficit disorder as the fifth-most-important trend (on a list of 10) that will shape 2007 and the years to come. In November 2007, *USA Today* reported in a page-one story: “A back-to-nature movement to reconnect children with the outdoors is burgeoning nationwide.” Another story appeared in February in *The Economist*; it described nature deficit as a serious threat to the conservation movement. And in June, the *Washington Post* ran a front-page story on the movement.

“There is no practical alternative to hope.”

Two years after the first publication of *Last Child in the Woods*, the issue is garnering more media attention than ever. Why? Because the story has changed. We now have a movement, and again, much credit should go to those who have worked for years to make something like this happen. As the movement continues to grow, so too will public consciousness — and action.

A truly sustainable national movement will gather much of its strength from independent regional campaigns. There is no single set of solutions; this is, after all, a place-based issue, planted fully in the biology and human ecology of each region. But the natural leaders of these regions can learn from one another. With this goal in mind, the Children & Nature Network has identified and networked over 30 urban regions in the United States and Canada that have

launched or are planning campaigns, which some of them call Leave No Child Inside, or variations on that phrase. In August, 2007, the Network brought leaders of these campaigns together for their first face-to-face meeting.

These leaders clearly have their work cut out for them. Not long ago, I visited Betsy Townsend and Bill Hopple, the leaders of Leave No Child Inside – Greater Cincinnati. They expressed predictable frustration: “We’re getting people together, but now what do we want them to *do*?” That’s exactly the right question. When I returned to Cincinnati recently, Betsy assembled a roomful of community leaders for a discussion. I was struck by how many on-the-ground changes were indeed already occurring, among them: educators had launched a nature preschool; a principal had converted her school into an environmental education center; the University of Cincinnati Child Care Center had committed to creating a “child-friendly backyard” on their premises; the director of Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center has asked the designers to consider how they might incorporate outdoor areas into the hospital’s major renovation; sophisticated public-awareness literature had been produced and distributed; numerous collaborative efforts had been launched, transcending political and religious boundaries.

All of this had occurred within a matter of months. It seemed to me that Betsy was so close to the campaign that she had not been able, or had the time, to take an inventory of what she and her campaign had already accomplished. Across the United States and Canada, natural leaders like Betsy are emerging — and *doing*.

The children and nature movement is growing at other levels, as well. Conservation organizations are showing increasing interest in how children engage with nature. In 2006, the Sierra Club’s Building Bridges to the Outdoors project took 11,500 young people, many from inner-city neighborhoods, into the natural world. In April, 2007, Sierra Club’s director of youth programs, Martin LeBlanc, working with the National Military Family Association, announced Operation Purple, which will offer free summer camps to 3,500 children of deployed military families. The National Wildlife Federation is rolling out the Green Hour, a national campaign to persuade parents to encourage their children to spend one hour a day in nature. John Flicker, president of the National Audubon Society, is campaigning for the creation of a family-focused nature center in every congressional district in the nation. Conservancy groups such as The Trust for Public Land are now working to assure that preserved natural areas continue to be protected by future generations.

In addition, The Conservation Fund has enlisted governors, mayors, cabinet secretaries, corporate CEOs and non-government organizations to help raise national awareness about the problems facing our children, and to help place in the spotlight the role that nature can play in addressing those problems. These people and organizations realize that the human child in nature may also be an endangered species — and the most important indicator of future sustainability.

The issue touches every sector. In April, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne invited me to speak to the 300 top managers of the Interior Department, and then challenged them to determine what their departments can do to turn the nature-deficit trend in a new direction. Governors such as Ed Rendell in Pennsylvania and Jodi Rell in Connecticut have launched statewide conferences on the issue. Two years ago, under the leadership of Rell and Gina McCarthy, Connecticut’s Commissioner of Environmental Protection, that state launched a pioneering program to encourage families to use the underutilized state parks. Replicable in every state, McCarthy’s effort was the first formal program to call itself No Child Left Inside.

Bills are being passed: In March, the New Mexico legislature passed the Outdoor Classrooms Initiative, an effort to increase outdoor education in the state; April 21, John Muir's birthday, Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire signed HB 1677 into law. Known as the state's "Leave No Child Inside Initiative," the legislation will allocate \$1.5 million a year to outdoor programs working with underserved children. In California, the Sierra Club is supporting Sen. Alex Padilla's SB 207, which will put in place sustainable funding for outdoor education and recreation programs serving at-risk youth. The legislation is co-sponsored by the American Diabetes Association and the California Sheriff's Association. Legislation in other states and at the national level is pending. In July, U.S. Rep. John Sarbanes introduced the federal No Child Left Inside Act, which he hopes will bring environmental education back to the classroom, and, indirectly, get more young people outside.

The private sector, too, is increasingly involved. For example, in June, Clint Eastwood hosted an assembly of California's largest developers to consider ways to build residential developments — and to redevelop aging suburbs into places that will connect children and adults to nature.

These are just a few examples of the children and nature movement's growing reach. But the hardest tasks remain: to help build and nurture the network of regional, state and national campaigns; to bring leaders of these campaigns together, often, so that they continue to learn from each other; to harness the power of the Internet to collect and distribute the growing body of studies on children and nature, best-practices, and news; to guarantee continued media attention and public awareness about the need to heal the broken bond between children and nature; and to marshal the powerful institutions and resources needed to sustain the movement.

As we move forward, we will need to establish baseline measurements to define success. We need more and better research from the academic world. We need greater commitment from the corporate sector, from health-care professionals, from law enforcement. We must identify and nurture more leaders in inner-city neighborhoods, and develop a better understanding of the barriers to nature, within those neighborhoods. One of the most important challenges for this movement will be to recruit younger natural leaders — children, teen-agers, college students and other young people whose commitment to the earth grows from personal experience in woods and fields and mountains and the oceans, in the creation.

The window of opportunity available to confront both climate change and the nature deficit is approximately the same. Unless we act now, one issue will be determined by the chemical imbalance in our atmosphere, the other by an imbalance in the human heart. In *Last Child in the Woods*, I made the case that a child's ability to dream begins with a sense of wonder, and while many things can ignite wonder, early joyful experience in nature offers a direct line. That said, young people — all of us — need a dream; we need to visualize what could be in order to reach what should be. Activist Michael Shellenberger once asked, "What if Martin Luther King had said, 'I have a nightmare' — what then?"

Over the past two years I have met people across our nation, young and old, ready to rediscover a sense of wonder, to be inspired by the regenerative power of nature, to believe again that we can make a new world. Truly, there is no practical alternative to hope.

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This article, “A Brief History of the Children & Nature Movement,” by Richard Louv, was adapted, with permission, from Louv’s 2007 Paul F-Brandwein Lecture. The Paul F-Brandwein Institute is a nonprofit organization. To perpetuate the work of Paul F-Brandwein, the Institute is dedicated to the education of all learners in recognition of their interdependence with nature and responsibility for sustaining a healthful and healing environment. The Institute Web site, www.brandwein.org, is both a showcase for the Institute’s activities, and a working environment for ongoing collaboration and dialogue among the Institute’s fellows, staff, and board members.