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INTRODUCTION

More than four years ago, a handful of like-minded individuals came together to form the Children and Nature Network (C&NN). Our mission was simple: to reconnect children to nature—for their physical health, cognitive development and emotional well-being, and for the good of the planet.

Since that time, a worldwide movement has taken shape and is spreading quickly across six continents. More than 80 cities, states, provinces and regions in North America—from Alaska and British Columbia to Kansas to the Adirondacks and north to Ontario—now have their own campaigns to connect children and families to nature. The movement is reaching inner-cities, suburbs and rural areas. Parents are organizing “nature clubs” to get their own and others’ families outdoors in nature on a frequent basis—in our national parks or right in the neighborhoods where they live. Downtown plans are being revised to incorporate natural play spaces. Physicians are “prescribing” time in nature to their young patients. In addition, we are seeing a growing popularity for nature-based education. We are watching as schoolteachers (not to mention our own First Lady) guide their kids outside to dig and learn in their garden and harvest a healthy meal. We are seeing changes in local, state and national policies and increased media coverage of solutions for closing the gap between children and the natural world.

In this, our fifth year, we are pleased to document some of C&NN’s achievements. As with any good network, our strength derives from the vitality and commitment of all who participate—individuals, families, organizations, agencies and whole communities. Ours is indeed a vigorous and committed group: With the seeds of innovative ideas and a sprinkling of resources, the Network has created a flourishing crop of projects this year, including organized networks of teachers, of families, and of young leaders committed to getting children outdoors; model programs in children’s health; tool kits for parent leaders; and dynamic new social media platforms to support regular communication among our members.

While taking a child outdoors can be as easy as opening a back door, removing the cultural, political, financial, and physical barriers to children’s time in nature is far more complex. We know big challenges remain. Recent studies indicate that young people are more electronically plugged in than ever. We know that many parents still don’t appreciate the many benefits to their children’s health and well-being from time spent in nature. We know that some schools still skimp on outdoor time for learning and play. But through conversations, partnerships, and intelligent teamwork to achieve results, we believe we are facilitating the beginnings of fundamental societal change in which it is a priority for every child to have regular, frequent, direct and meaningful experiences with nature in their everyday lives.

We’ve much, much more work to do. The good news is that the children and nature movement is inherently inspiring, rewarding, fun and healthy. We thank you for everything you contribute to this vital movement to reconnect children—and all of us—with nature in our daily lives. Children everywhere will benefit as they become healthier, happier, more confident—and are nourished by a deep bond to nature that will in turn prepare them to care for the Earth throughout their lives.

Richard Louv and Cheryl Charles
“If you go with long-term significance, my pick for the top story of not only 2009 but also of the 21st Century is the pandemic of Nature-Deficit Disorder, a term so aptly coined by Richard Louv in his best-selling outdoor book, Last Child in the Woods.”
— Bill Schneider,
Top Five Outdoor Stories of 2009,
21st century, 12/31/09
A FEW INDICATORS OF PROGRESS:

• Nature-Deficit Disorder moves into the public vernacular

• Physicians are recommending time in nature for children’s healthy development

• Illinois Governor Quinn re-opens state parks and cites Last Child in the Woods

• National parks and state parks across North America launch campaigns to connect families to nature; visits grow

• Sesame Street changes its set for the first time in 40 years—to include nature!

• Nature-focused preschools, other nature-themed schools, and school gardens are growing

• The White House launches America’s Great Outdoors Campaign and the First Lady creates “Let’s Move,” including “Let’s Move Outside!”

• Networks of young Natural Leaders and Natural Teachers are spreading

• Across North America and now in Europe and Australia, families are banding together to create family nature clubs

• A growing number of state and regional children and nature campaigns are self-organizing and growing, demonstrating the Reverend Gerald Durley’s observation: A movement moves!
WHY WE REMAIN WORRIED: MILES TO GO!

• Electronic media use by children and youth has increased in the past five years to more than 50 hours per week

• Obesity and other health-related risks continue at epidemic rates among children and youth (as well as adults!)

• Children’s recognition of wild species continues to decline

• Inequality of access to nature’s benefits to children’s development continues

• As of 2008, more human beings live in cities than countryside, presenting the challenge of re-naturing city life as urbanization increases

• Children’s direct experiences in nature as part of their everyday lives remain endangered

According to a recent survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Fund, young people ages 8-18 spend more than 7 ½ hours a day on smart phones and computers and watching television—over 53 hours a week plugged into electronic media, and an increase over five years earlier.
C&NN has identified and supported more than 80 city, state, provincial, and regional campaigns focused on getting children and youth out into nature. While some of these campaigns are driven by single agencies or organizations, most of those formed in the past three years are cross-sector alliances, with government agencies, non-governmental organizations, businesses and others pooling their resources to create the biggest impact. This is a trend that C&NN has encouraged. C&NN’s Community Action Guide: Building the Children and Nature Movement from the Ground Up (http://www.childrenandnature.org/downloads/CNActGuide1.1.pdf) is a tried-and-true tool kit for fostering the children and nature movement through collaborative community efforts.

In the fall of 2009, C&NN conducted the first-ever North American survey of these grassroots initiatives, (http://www.childrenandnature.org/downloads/C&NNGrassrootsSurvey2009.pdf) with analysis of the results by independent evaluator, Dr. M. Lynette Fleming. Through this survey, we established a baseline and verified much that we have known anecdotally. The campaigns exist across rural, suburban, and urban areas. They serve populations representing a cross-section of socio-economic and educational backgrounds, but often with a special emphasis on underserved youth. And they consistently report significant changes resulting from their work—ranging from an increase in awareness of the importance to children of time in nature to community support for their programs to increased participation by pediatricians who are making the children and nature connection for children’s healthy development.

C&NN 2009 Grassroots Survey—A Few of the Findings

• The children and nature grassroots campaigns in more than 40 states report between 900,000 and 1.5 million participants in 2009.

• At least 500 new school gardens, natural play areas, and community gardens for children have been established in the areas served by these grassroots initiatives.

• C&NN’s grassroots leaders report reaching in the range of 248,000 to 500,000 participants in new natural play areas in 2009; 180,000 to 360,000 participants in new community gardens; and between 293,000 and 530,000 participants in new school gardens, many of which may be schoolyard habitat projects.

• The nationwide grassroots leaders estimate that between 87,500 to 316,000 underserved youth were reached in 2009 with new natural play areas; between 45,250 to 176,600 underserved youth were reached with community gardens; and between 89,000 to 401,500 underserved youth were reached in 2009 with new school gardens.

Nearly 70% of the campaigns used or distributed the research and studies available through C&NN. About half of the campaigns used the Report on the Movement to Re-Connect Children with the Natural World, C&NN electronic newsletters, C&NN Community Action Guide, and the website news summaries. Nearly half of the grassroots initiatives reported using the C&NN Nature Clubs for Families Tool Kit: Do It Yourself! Do It Now! And:

• 74% of the campaigns report an increase in community support;

• 71% report increased awareness of the importance of nature for children’s healthy development;

• 71% report increased media attention; and

• More than half report an increased number of people participating in events and programs.
The “American Beliefs Associated with Children’s Nature Experience Opportunities: Development and Application of the EC-NES Scale,” was conducted by the Maryland-based independent non-profit learning research Institute for Learning Innovation (ILI) at the request of the Children & Nature Network. Authors are John Fraser, Ph.D., AIA; Joe E. Heimlich, Ph.D.; and Victor Yocco, M.Ed. This is the first study to establish a baseline measure of the attitudes of the American public concerning the importance of direct experiences in nature for children’s healthy development. Among its findings, the survey indicates that parents and others in the public see the benefits to children’s physical development and their love of nature from nature-based experiences, but do not tend to see the cognitive, emotional and social benefits from those experiences. The study also revealed a wide age differentiation—the younger the adult participating in the survey, the less likely he or she is to see the benefits for children’s healthy development from these experiences in nature. The report may be downloaded at http://www.childrenandnature.org/downloads/EC-NES_Final_Report_2010.pdf

While the public reports positive attitudes about children playing outdoors in nature, the respondents also reported barriers. The most dominant was concern about safety. Respondents reported significant differences between locations where they played as children, such as woods, and where they let children play today, such as indoors. They identified “wilder” places like woods, streams and ponds as the riskiest locations. To C&NN, this discrepancy strongly suggests that the movement must develop new ways for parents to feel safer introducing their children to nature, such as Family Nature Clubs (http://www.childrenandnature.org/movement/natureclubs/).

“Just a quick note to thank you for all you are doing with C&NN. It is wonderful to have so much research, current event information and enthusiasm for getting children reconnected with the outdoors all in one place.”
– Herbert W. Broda, Ph.D., Professor of Education, Ashland University, Ohio

quote 2010 Report from the Children & Nature Network
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EXTRAORDINARY TOOLS FOR EVERYDAY PEOPLE:

By now, the call to reconnect children to nature has been made on countless radio programs, TV shows, and in magazines, Web articles, and talks related to Richard Louv’s groundbreaking publication, Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder. But what’s an average parent, inspired by this message, supposed to do? C&NN has developed a number of accessible tools and knowledge bases for immediate use by families, teachers, grandparents, young leaders and others. Among them:

Nature Clubs for Families: The Do It Yourself, Do It Now Approach

When a family heads outdoors, they discover the joy and health benefits of walking, playing, and adventuring in nature. And when two or more families head outdoors? They discover all that, plus a boost to security, friendships, and nature know-how.

Many parents who are reluctant to take their kids outdoors on their own will readily join a family nature club—an organized group of families who regularly participate in outdoor adventures together. With that in mind, C&NN secured generous support from REI to create and promote C&NN’s Nature Clubs for Families Tool Kit: Do It Yourself! Do It Now! The tool kit is packed with resources for helping families form clubs of their own—from checklists to sample waiver forms to Web resources. Since its release in February, 2009, more than 2,500 copies have been distributed in print form, and more than 6,000 have been downloaded free of charge from the C&NN website. Copies of the tool kit are available in English or in Spanish at http://www.childrenandnature.org/movement/natureclubs/

Supported by this resource, dozens of new Nature Clubs for Families have formed in just this past year. In addition, the tool kit has enabled existing club leaders to more easily participate in the widespread trend toward escalating memberships: already, several clubs boast memberships of more than 200 families—and a few have around 500 families participating!

In the fall of 2008, there were 10 Nature Clubs for Families registered on the C&NN website. Now there are more than 80.

“I just wanted to let the Children and Nature Network know how much I value the new Nature Clubs for Families Tool Kit. What a wonderful resource! RI Families in Nature is fairly new, but we’ve grown to include 80 families in our 2+ short months of existence. With that growth, I was just starting to consider such issues as liability, photo release permission, and the types of events and activities I could conduct. I simply cannot tell you how much I appreciate the Tool Kit and how sure I am that it will help make RI Families in Nature a successful organization.”

–Jeanine Silversmith, Rhode Island Families in Nature

Nature Rocks: On a Roll!

C&NN and ecoAmerica with partners The Nature Conservancy, REI, American Camp Association and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service launched Nature Rocks (www.naturerocks.org), a vibrant new Web platform and campaign designed to help parents turn inspiration to action. The site is packed with simple ideas for things to do outside with your kids—from collecting leaves to making mud brick fairy houses. Visitors to Nature Rocks can also locate “nearby nature”—parks and other natural areas in their region.
Natural Leaders: Showing the Way

Young people from around the nation took to the outdoors on April 4th, 2009 to celebrate the inauguration of C&NN’s Natural Leaders Network (NLN) and the Natural Leaders’ first Get Outside! Day. This new network is encouraging and facilitating opportunities for young people ages 15-29 to spend time outdoors and empower youth their age and younger to reconnect with nature. “We are creating a group of motivated young leaders in this movement,” says Juan Martinez, C&NN’s Natural Leaders coordinator. “Often we find that the people who are talking about connecting youth with nature are not so young, so the Natural Leaders Network seeks to connect all the youth who are already doing so with those who want to but don’t know where to look for a support system.”

C&NN co-founder Martin LeBlanc adds, “The Natural Leaders campaign is empowering young people across the country, and beyond our borders, to go outdoors, take their friends with them, and help organize their communities to guarantee safe places for children to play in the natural world. Young Natural Leaders come from inner cities, suburbs, and rural areas. Every child has a right to the gifts of nature.”

To date, the Natural Leaders have initiated and coordinated an impressive number of efforts in their regions while working with other national partners including The North Face, REI and the Obama Administration to find ways to get more youth outdoors; among them, a healing garden at the Austin Child Guidance Center; an environmental education workshop and campout for kids in Taos, New Mexico; and the first ever Wyoming Youth Congress on Children and Nature, with 78 eighth graders sharing their thoughts about the value of nature in young people’s lives. Natural Leaders were heavily involved in supporting the Obama Administration’s America’s Great Outdoors Listening Tour during the summer of 2010 and even facilitated and moderated some of the sessions. Natural Leaders helped organize Outdoor Nation, an event led by the Outdoor Foundation in which over 6000 youth from across the United States participated. Natural Leaders are leading the way in connecting youth to the outdoors in nature and creating a new generation of community and conservation leaders.

Natural Teachers Network

Based on the belief that “every teacher can be a natural teacher,” C&NN has launched the Natural Teachers Network. Teachers in all subject and skill areas, from formal education to afterschool programs and more can bring the classroom into nature—and nature into the classroom. C&NN has created a “I am a Natural Teacher” certificate of participation, compiled research to document the education and learning-related benefits to children from nature-based experiences, and will soon launch a Natural Teachers Network newsletter, co-edited by outstanding educators, Dr. Tamra Willis and Dr. Herb Broda. Additional tools and resources will follow as funding allows.

“My teacher, Dr. Rona Zollinger began the Environmental Studies Academy (ESA) as a once-a-week project for students who wanted to help restore Alhambra Creek. It is now a daily school for students who want to connect to the earth and make a difference in their local community … Before entering the ESA, I was unsure of what the future was going to look like, because I knew I wasn’t going to be able to succeed in a traditional high school. Now I am in my senior year of the ESA and I see how the program helped me to feel connected to my local watershed and to my community. As a result, I have developed into a strong, competent leader with a bright career in teaching. I am eternally grateful to Rona for everything she has done for me.” – Student nomination of her teacher for C&NN’s Natural Teachers Award
PROMISING PRACTICES:

Grow Outside!

In 2008, Richard Louv and C&NN proposed a national pediatrics “Grow Outside!” campaign. The idea was that pediatricians and other health professionals could be powerful voices for that reconnection, by offering “prescriptions” to go outside, along with posters, pamphlets, and personal persuasion—an effort modeled on the national physical fitness campaign launched by President John F. Kennedy. Since then, several such programs have been launched by such organizations as the National Environmental Education Foundation, collaborating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Audubon Society, USDA Forest Service and the Department of Interior’s Office of Youth in Natural Resources. In 2010, the First Lady’s campaign, “Let’s Move” (and its recently added subset, “Let’s Move Outside”) was created to fight child obesity. And in October, 2010, Richard Louv gave the plenary keynote address to over 3,000 pediatricians and other pediatric health providers at the national conference of the American Academy of Pediatrics, where he announced C&NN’s formalized Grow Outside! campaign for pediatricians.

C&NN in Michigan

Walk into the major pediatric practices in Holland, Michigan, and you’ll see posters encouraging parents to get their kids outdoors. Visit Head Start programs in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and you’ll see a pack of preschoolers heading outdoors to play and learn. Go to Detroit’s Belle Isle, and you will see families going outdoors in nature together.

With generous support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and in partnership with the Children & Nature Network, three Michigan communities used the C&NN Community Action Guide: Building the Children and Nature Movement from the Ground Up to begin a dialogue among local leaders about why direct experience in nature is good for children’s health and well-being and a process for how to increase those experiences for all children. As anticipated, their resulting action plans were unique, showing the versatility of the Guide and the diversity of each community group. Downtown planning, early childhood education, family outings, pediatric medicine, and local media outreach were among the many areas in which community members saw a place to infuse new child and nature connections. The Michigan programs are focused on children of all backgrounds, with a special emphasis on low-income and vulnerable children who are disproportionately affected by nature deficit. C&NN is documenting these success stories to serve as models for future children and nature campaigns throughout the country.
Dr. Paul Dykema has practiced general Pediatrics for nearly 45 years, giving him a longitudinal view of the health of American children. The Michigan pediatrician states that, “among the most striking changes I have observed over my career are the rise of obesity, type 2 Diabetes, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), anxiety and depression.” He continues, “There are many factors contributing to the increase of these disorders in children but it is apparent that the lack of outdoor, unstructured and imaginative play is a significant contributor.”

Dr. Dykema has been involved with the Outdoor Discovery Center (ODC) since its formation in 2000. The ODC is actively developing a “No Child Left Inside” initiative. One of its emphases is reaching pre-school children (three to five year olds) in Western Michigan. Dr. Dykema is presently working with the ODC, Children & Nature Network and other local collaborators to emphasize the importance of nature play for children.

Holland Pediatric Associates, the practice he founded, revamped its waiting room with a running video loop of Richard Louv which stresses the importance of nature play for children and posters showing children engaged in outdoor activities during all seasons. Pamphlets stressing the importance of outdoor play are also available to parents. During Wellness Visits with parents and children, providers participate with writing prescriptions to encourage children to: 1) Go outside and play for at least one to two hours a day; and 2) Read 20 minutes each evening. Dr. Dykema, along with the ODC, promotes these initiatives with other medical practices, the Community Health Center, Intercare—which is a federally-funded clinic for the uninsured—and local health departments.
From its inception, the Children and Nature Network is a place for innovative ideas and solutions for helping reconnect children and nature. It was here that the idea for family nature clubs and a Natural Teachers Network emerged. “What if…” Richard Louv has written on many an occasion: What if land trust tools were available at the neighborhood level, so that neighbors could create “button parks”—so named, because they could “sew them on themselves?” What if educators could empower each other to make outdoor learning a regular part of class curricula? What if parents, grandparents and other caregivers learned new ways to confront their fears and take children into nature safely? What if a national conference could bring the legal professions together to make it easier for families, schools and cities to provide accessible, safe places to play outdoors? What if a Third Ring of social networking, using electronic and face-to-face organizing tools, could be created to support the work of existing programs as it seeds self-replicating culture changes? As the children and nature movement becomes increasingly international, what if 2012 were declared the International Year of the Child in Nature? This past year, these ideas and others have been incubated and tended as part of C&NN’s Innovation Institute—a thought-to-action effort to move beyond nostalgia and create new methods to connect kids and their families outdoors in every kind of community.

“The Children & Nature Network research links were so incredibly valuable to my research journey, please thank those involved very much for the enormous service they are doing to compile and make available the exciting research in this essential field.”

– Alice Ashwell, Ph.D. Candidate, South Africa
MISSION

The mission of the Children & Nature Network is to build a worldwide movement to reconnect children and nature—for their health and well-being. C&NN builds awareness, provides access to state-of-the-art resources, supports the grassroots with tools and strategies, develops publications and educational materials, synthesizes the best available research, and encourages collaboration to heal the broken bond between children and nature. C&NN is a 501c3 non-profit organization.

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