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Playing in the Mud

Playing in the Mud: Can Kids Learn About Nature in the Malls?

By Donald Dann

The environment ranks 28th in importance to Americans among all non-economic issues, based on a recent Gallup Poll. Yet the League of Conservation Voters reports that 81% of us are "pro-environment," which leads us to ask why there is an absence of real conservation consciousness with so many Americans.

Could the root of the problem lie in how we are raising our children? For most people born before 1950, today's shopping mall was a rare part of growing up. We walked to school, to friend's houses, to shops and movies. The afternoons were spent with friends playing sports or in nearby "empty lots," using our imaginations endlessly. We would look for insects or snakes or turtles or just explore nature. The "outside" was a neat place to be and to learn about all sorts of critters, breathe fresh air, pick pretty wildflowers (before learning that was not good to do), and more. In short, many of us developed a bond with the natural world and a commitment to conservation that stems from that period.

In today's world, kids grow up in a totally different and regrettably "antiseptic" atmosphere. Children are driven just about everywhere. After school, they're at home with friends on "play dates". They play board games, use electronic toys (including computers) or are riveted to TV comedy, cartoons, video games or the like. The sense of "danger out there" that most parents feel precludes their kids' environmental explorations.

Will Nixon put it well in describing what children "miss out on in their bug period – the years of middle childhood, in which children traditionally roamed their local swamps, woods, creeks, and other natural places in search of whatever fascinates them...the freedom and rich trove of discoveries afforded by natural places."

How can we give these experiences back to our children so they grow with a sense of the awesomeness of nature and its critical place in our lives, and yet provide for their safety? Here are some possibilities:

- Take a child for a wildlife-watching day, bringing binoculars. With patience you can see small mammals and birds, turn over a log and look for insects, or sweep prairie grasses with a butterfly net to examine the critters there.
- Nature centers in nearby parks, botanic gardens, natural history museums, forest preserves, etc., frequently run educational programs and field trips in which your family can participate. Volunteers are needed for a variety of work, including "workdays" for restoration, e.g., eliminating invasive plants. It's best is to participate in these activities as a family and encourage your children and grandchildren to learn about our native plants and animals.

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- Plan a nature vacation with children/grandchildren. The national parks, wildlife refuges, and monuments of America are among the world's greatest natural treasures. In many, rangers provide interpretive walks and lectures, which can be not only educational but also inspiring, especially to the youngsters, so they can grow with a sense of the awe and wonder of the natural world.
- Encourage your local schools to develop environmental curricula and/or outdoor learning centers, and volunteer to chaperone.

The environment will not matter to us as a society unless we learn about it and are conscious of living in it in our daily lives. Then we will come to love it and take care of it.

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