

News from the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: April 16, 2008

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Earth Day Opinion/Editorial (458 words)

“Take a Hike, Game Boy!”

Thomas S. Burack, Department of Environmental Services Commissioner

Nature-Deficit Disorder, does your child have it? I am trying my best to prevent my children from getting it. Author Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, has been a catalyst for kick-starting a movement across our country to address what he says is a troubling disconnect between today's children and the great outdoors.

Numerous studies, including one recently released by The Nature Conservancy, confirm that people, especially children, are spending less time in the outdoors. I seriously doubt that this is much of a surprise to parents of school-age children. The competition for their time, never mind family time, is enormous. Between school, organized activities and sports, homework, television, computer games and the internet, time spent independently exploring nature has taken a back seat.

However, the evidence suggests that the absence of nature in our children's lives comes at a high cost, including the increased risk of obesity, attention deficit-disorders, depression and stress-related symptoms. Louv conjectures that exposure to nature can help reduce these problems and even improve our children's academic and emotional growth.

A New Hampshire initiative to reconnect children with nature was set in motion early last year. The initiative has grown into the New Hampshire Children In Nature Coalition, which is dedicated to fostering experiences in nature with the goals to improve physical and emotional health and well-being, increase understanding of and care for the natural world and promote stronger connections to community and landscape. For more information about this initiative, please visit www.wildlife.state.nh.us/ChildrenInNature/.

To be successful, this effort must begin by knocking down barriers so that the public once again considers it to be the norm for children to be outside and playing in natural areas. Luckily for most of us, there is no shortage of access to natural areas here in New Hampshire. So what's the problem? Let's just let our kids go outside and be kids. I certainly remember fondly my childhood explorations without constant parental supervision, but we parents today are hesitant. To get kids outside, we as parents have to put into perspective many of our own fears—from stranger danger to poison ivy, and from mosquito bites to bears.

As another Earth Day quickly approaches, I would like to issue a challenge to my fellow New Hampshire parents to see through much of the sensationalized media and the time crunch of our daily lives to set aside some time to share in nature with your children. You don't have to hike a

4,000-footer or paddle some white-water, just feel the grass under your feet, talk about the types of trees in your yard, or find out what kinds of critters are crawling under the rocks. Your children, and society, will thank you.

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