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Reconnecting children with nature

This issue of Conservation Education represents a departure from our usual format, as normally the publication is written for teachers and is for use in schools. Whilst this issue undoubtedly can be used by teachers, it is perhaps more aimed at parents who want to encourage their children in the process of connecting or reconnecting with nature. Pages 6-9 are full of ideas to help you to encourage your children to have a much greater interaction with the natural world.

Out of touch

Children are losing touch with the natural world. It's something that is becoming increasingly common knowledge. Ever since Richard Louv created the term 'Nature Deficit Disorder' for his 2005 book 'Lost Child In The Woods', the debate over how we can reverse this trend has been growing in momentum.

Research has shown how the disconnect with nature is manifesting itself in the lives of our children. There are many factors contributing to the way that today's children live most of their lives inside their homes, or at the very least within sight of their parents at all times.



TV and video games are playing an increasing part in many children's lives

Screen obsessed couch potatoes

Britain's children now watch on average over 17 hours of television a week and spend a further 20 hours a week online. Our 11-15 year olds now spend an average of around seven of their waking hours each day in front of a screen of some kind. So how has this happened? Well, much as some would like to blame technology, many of us as parents have to take our share of the culpability.

Shrinking territories

Much like many endangered species, our children have seen their 'territories' reduced vastly in a generation. In fact, the radius around their homes that children are allowed to roam free from parental control has been reduced by 90% since the 1970s. In some ways this is a good thing, in that it has made children safer, but it has had the effect of reducing children's abilities to relate to the natural world and has in some cases brought about unintended adverse health effects too.

In 1971, 80% of 7-8 year olds walked to school by themselves or with friends. Now that figure is down to less than 10%, and most of those walking to school are accompanied by their parents for safety reasons.

Health and safety culture

There are many curbs on children's freedom that are imposed by our culture of 'health and safety'. This has seen up to a fifth of children banned from playing conkers, a similar number from playing games of 'tag' and almost half from climbing trees according to a survey by Play England, carried out in 2008. In fact, the Health and Safety Executive actively encourages sensible levels of risk in activities. How else are children going to learn how to manage danger for themselves? Or do we want them to grow up into adults who never take a risk and always play it safe? That would surely put a curb on human endeavour, exploration and discovery, not just in the natural world, but in science, medicine, business and industry too. As parents, we need to decide what levels of risk are sensible and at what age we expose our children to them.



Anti-social adventure?

Children playing in the outdoors are sometimes regarded with suspicion by the public. And if they are very young, it's not that surprising. But as they get older, children playing in a park without adult supervision, building a shelter in the local copse or setting up a temporary 'camp' area somewhere should be allowed to get on with it, provided that they are doing no lasting damage and they are not causing undue noise or disturbance to people living nearby. Surely getting some fresh air and exercise, rather than sitting at home staring at a TV or computer screen should be seen as a good thing, rather than a possible crime.

Children need hands-on interaction with nature in order to be enthused, to learn and to experience the excitement that a close encounter can provide. There is a tendency to think that interaction with the wild should be supervised and prescribed, with information boards and signage all over nature reserves showing people what they should be seeing. It is useful to have the information available, but sometimes unstructured and (if you feel your children are ready and you are feeling brave enough) unsupervised play in natural spaces can be really important to children. Sometimes it doesn't so much matter what children are learning from nature, it's more that they get to enjoy it.



Whilst on residential trips with children from London schools, one of my favourite examples of how that unstructured interaction with nature happens is when the children are presented with an empty beach. After being told "OK, we'll be here for about half an hour, you've got some free time, here's the beach, help yourselves" each groups' reaction was the same. At first confusion - they were unused to unstructured time and even more unfamiliar with an environment like a Dorset beach. Then, slowly but surely they looked around for something to do. It was November, so venturing in the sea was a non-starter. But the sun was shining

and before long, someone was making something - perhaps a castle or a sculpture in the sand. In minutes, the entire group would be absorbed in their own activities, collecting pebbles, seaweed and driftwood to decorate their creations in the sand, while others concentrated on the sculpting, building and designing. And in the end, half an hour wasn't enough for them. They wanted more time. Remember, these were city children, used to being at home or school most of the time, with very little interaction with the natural world. Yet in minutes, they were having fun, imagining and creating, playing and enjoying the simplicity, the olfactory, visual and tactile pleasures that the sea air, the views, the sand and pebbles could offer them.

Redressing the balance

Much of our children's 'territory' reduction has been caused by increased perception of dangers on the part of parents. The world we are living in now is very different from that of our own childhoods. We didn't have the internet, children's TV lasted about two hours a day and I have memories of seeing the test card - an impossibility in today's 24 hour always on, always online culture. Whilst there is a real temptation to keep our children safe and where we can see them, and that is understandable, often it means they are kept indoors and have only limited time to interact with the natural world.

Our children need to be allowed greater freedoms to get outdoors either in local parks or in the countryside. That in some cases will mean that parents might need to change their own lifestyles, giving greater opportunities to their children to get out into the countryside and in some cases discovering or rediscovering a love of the natural world for themselves. I am not suggesting that you should just turn your children loose, as that would be too daunting for parents and children alike. But letting them sometimes feel at least a little bit unsupervised in an area you can observe, but not necessarily interfere, will give the children the opportunity to find out more about themselves, to start to learn about risk and to regain that vital contact with the natural world which modern living has largely deprived them of.

Schools can have a real role in providing children with some background knowledge that they can then go on to use themselves when having their own wild adventures. Learning in a supervised environment how to pond dip safely and about the creatures they might find there is one way in which schools have a real part to play. Increasingly, schools have areas for the children to grow their own vegetables, or an area of wild grounds - perhaps even a Forest School, where children can become comfortable with the idea of playing, working and being in the natural world. The experience children gain in these safe areas can help to proof them against dangers they may encounter when exploring a wild place for themselves.



A wild cook-out can be a great learning experience

Lost connections

It is staggering how children have lost their connection with nature within the last few decades and here I'm not talking about children's knowledge of nature, but rather their lack of experience of wild places. For much of my childhood in the 1980s, I roamed unsupervised within a half-mile or so of the family home and the 'nature' I encountered within the bounds of our fairly leafy Surrey housing estate was pretty tame. But I remember the days spent searching for frogs, newts and toads in the pond at the end of the road, the nets and jam jars and everyone's excitement whenever one of us caught something; the hours spent cycling the dirt tracks of the local woodland, the thrill of an occasional encounter with a slow worm or rabbit.

If you ask people born in the fifties or sixties about their childhoods, most will talk of the adventures they had, the amount of time they had to play unsupervised, well away from home, often with a few of their friends, but with no other plan except a time by which to be home for dinner. Contrast that experience with the highly organised, timetabled and supervised lives of modern children.

It's not surprising that something has had to give, but it's a shame that in many cases, it is children's relationship with the natural world that has been sacrificed to enable them to get other experiences - dance classes, swimming lessons etc. all of which are valuable in their own right. As an adult, I have spent a lot of time guiding groups of young people through the natural world. I like to think they have learned a lot from their experiences, and that in many cases their thirst for knowledge of the natural world, or simply their appreciation of being in wild, open spaces was fuelled or awakened.

We need many more of our children to be able to have those experiences - encountering nature at first hand, rather than only ever seeing it on TV or on the internet. TV shows can enable children to understand more about creatures they might never see in the wild (not in the UK, anyway) and to observe the behaviour of those they may see here in the UK in greater depth. However, they are no substitute for seeing our native wildlife in the flesh.



Real-life animal encounters beat those on TV hands down



An activity like shelter building is a great way to spark children's interest in the natural world.

Using nature to nurture

There are documented health and attainment benefits to be gained from regular contact with the natural world too, including a reduction in stress levels, anxiety and depression. And it's not just about reductions in conditions that we might view as 'bad'. Contact with nature can also bring about increases in self esteem and attention span, along with improved fitness levels resulting from getting more exercise in

the outdoors. What's more, children who have the time to play in an unsupervised way with other children in a natural setting tend to be more creative, more co-operative and better problem solvers.

It's all very well solving a problem in the virtualised world of a computer game, but how much more useful and memorable is it to work out how in real life you're going to get your improvised shelter to stand up, or how you're all going to get across the stream without getting your feet wet?



Things to do

Here are some ideas for how to get children acclimatised to getting out into nature more, whilst getting adults more used to the idea of giving their children some limited freedom and increased access to the natural environment. Some are very much 'family' activities, while others will work in a school setting and still others will allow children a little more freedom to explore for themselves.

- **Simply go for a walk together in the countryside.** Allow the children to be ahead of you, but not out of sight. Relax and enjoy the fresh air and the calming sights and sounds of the countryside.

- **Make a map string.** When on your walk in the countryside, use this native

American method for reminding you of your journey. All you need is a length of string. As you progress, encourage your child to pick up leaves, sticks, perhaps coloured stones, a feather or anything else you come across as a way of reminding them of key parts of the walk. Did you pass a cluster of holly trees on the path, was there a part where the chalk under the soil was exposed, was there a beautiful wild flower meadow?

- **Create opportunities for your children to play outdoors in an unstructured way.** Let them loose in your back garden, take them to the local park or to your local woodland, heath or beach. If you're going to the sea, or any other large body of water like a pond, river, lake etc. make sure you have clear rules about what children are allowed to do and how close they are allowed to get to the water. (You may need to change or adapt these rules for different weather conditions).
- **Start a nature club for families in your area.** Try to organise visits to local parks, commons etc. and involve other parents and their children too.
- **Give your child a cheap camera and encourage them to take photos of nature as they encounter it.** Try to develop their interest through learning about nature together. You can use the internet or guide books to identify what they have seen and gradually build up knowledge together.



- **Walk or ride a bike or scooter to school**, if it's safe to do so.
- **Get hold of a bug hunting kit**. Cheap ones are readily available and provide the opportunity for a child to have a wide range of animal encounters in even a very small patch of garden. If you have a pooter or two available, you can have great fun collecting smaller mini beasts for closer examination (see below).



- **Go hug a tree**. Not a weird as it sounds, this is an activity best done either blindfolded or with your eyes shut (make sure someone who can see is there to guide you, or don't close your eyes or put the blindfold on until you're already hugging the tree!). Feel the texture of the bark - the contrast between an oak and a beech, for example is very marked indeed. It can be fun to try and recognise the tree after your blindfold has been removed. At the same time, learn how to tell the difference between a few different species. You could also let your children try having a go at tree climbing. How high they climb is a balance between their abilities and your nerves. Remember that it's often much more difficult to get down than to climb up!
- **Invite wildlife into your garden**. Make a log pile in a quiet spot and cover it with leaves to provide shelter for mini beasts or even reptiles. Buy or make a bug hotel, some nest boxes for birds (or even bats). Maybe you could make a hedgehog house too. Once you've provided the accommodation, you could look at the catering as well! Dog or cat food on a saucer makes perfect hedgehog food, while there is a wide range of bird feeds available from pet shops and garden centres.



- **Go shelter building.** Try your hand out at building a shelter in your local woods. Make sure you use only fallen wood. Don't rip branches off trees. This is a great fun activity and provides children with a great focus, getting them more accustomed to getting dirty, while giving them the opportunity to experience all kinds of different textures - wood, moss, lichen, leaves and mud, for example!



- **Hone your tracker skills.** When out and about with your children, look for animal tracks, trails and even droppings! Learn to identify the different kinds. You could even make plaster casts of the prints, but this is to be done ONLY under adult supervision, as plaster of Paris has the potential to be harmful if not handled correctly. To do so, arm yourself with the following: a bottle of water, a small bucket - one from a beach bucket and spade set is a handy size, some strips of cardboard about 7cm wide and 25cm long, a stick, a small bag of plaster of Paris and some paperclips. If you want to make a cast of a print, make the cardboard strip into a circle and clip it using the paperclip so that it forms a ring around the print. Ensure the paper clip is at the top (otherwise it will set in your cast) and push your circle of card down firmly to prevent leaks. Mix the plaster as directed on the pack and pour into your cardboard mould. Allow the plaster time to set and then gently pull up your cast. Clean off the mud and remove the cardboard and paperclip. You should be left with a great cast of an animal footprint. This works brilliantly for deer slots, but all kinds of prints can be made into casts, though you may need longer cardboard strips if you start working on human prints! Ensure that you avoid the plaster getting into contact with skin and eyes by using plastic gloves and if necessary safety goggles. Please remember that in large quantities, plaster of Paris can be dangerous, as it gets very hot as it sets. Don't be tempted to make a cast of a body part, like a hand or finger. Serious burns and even amputations can result!



- **Make time to listen.** When in a wild place, stop and spend a few minutes just listening to the sounds around you. Perhaps you could make a simple sound map in a notebook afterwards, putting yourself at the centre. Draw in dots to represent the sounds you hear in relation to your position and label them. You could use bigger dots for louder sounds and smaller dots for quieter ones. Sounds might be birdsong, the sound of the wind whistling in the trees, a rustle in the undergrowth, caused perhaps by a blackbird.
- **Get your children interested in growing their own vegetables.** This can be done at home, at school or on an allotment. There is great satisfaction to be had in seeing seeds that you have planted grow into something you can either enjoy looking at, or perhaps even better, eat! Growing their own veg

helps children to understand about natural processes and how to look after a crop. It may even tempt them into trying (and most likely enjoying) a vegetable or vegetables that had been the subject of horror previously! Gardening has been shown to bring great health benefits in terms of lowering stress too, so it's definitely one to try!

- **Get a National Trust membership.** Annual family membership of the National Trust is available for under £100 for a family and allows free unlimited access to a huge range of properties with large grounds and free parking at some amazing beaches and countryside across the UK. It's a great way to get your family into the outdoors where you can enjoy adventures on countryside trails.



These are just some suggestions. You or your children will no doubt come up with many more. The important thing is that together we try to bring about this quiet revolution to reconnect our children with the natural world that they are very much a part of. If we want future generations to take better care of our planet, they need to understand why that's important. And that understanding will come through interaction with nature and with a love of the outdoors.



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