

# Googling<sup>\*</sup> Nature

BY GENE BAKKO

**D**O YOU REALIZE that the average American teenager recognizes well over 100 commercial logos and name brands, but can identify fewer than 10 species of trees?

And what we do not know about, we tend to ignore.

Young people today hear much about global warming and environmental threats, but their physical contact with nature, their intimacy with nature, is rapidly fading or nonexistent.

Human beings have dominated the earth more than any other life form in the history of the planet, affecting the destiny of all living creatures today. That's an incredible responsibility. We have been nomadic hunters and gatherers for more than 98 percent of our history. We contain the coils of nucleotides, DNA, that allows for intimate contact with nature. Noted zoologist Gordon Orians believes that our visual environment affects our physical and mental well-being, and he underscores the importance of evolutionary past experiences with nature that are hard-wired into our nervous system.

Author Richard Louv, in his new book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder*, cites a growing body of evidence that links our mental, physical and spiritual health to our direct association (or disassociation) with nature. Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD) is now an acronym tossed around in psychological and mental health circles. Recent studies have shown that the better known Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) can be alleviated in many cases by exposing young people to nature, a process

often referred to as eco-psychology.

According to Louv, three frontiers ink American society to nature. The first is utilitarianism: conquer the land and use it. Davy Crockett was part of that frontier. The second is the romantic attachment to nature: love it, protect it and preserve it. Although good deeds are done, this preservationist mindset is partly responsible for our current detachment from nature because we tend to set it aside for protection and limit our interaction with it. The third frontier, the one we are now entering and that contributes to NDD, is electronic detachment.

In an examination of childhood play, Dr. Robin Moore, director of the National Learning Institute, says, "the primary experience of nature is being replaced by the secondary, vicarious, often distorted

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one-way experience of television and other electronic media." Children learn about nature on public television or on *Animal Planet*, and the programs, while educational, give the illusion that the environment is being protected. Computer games, PlayStations, X-Boxes and television steal experiential time. Nature amplifies it.

Our children and youth have little or no direct physical involvement with nature, whether it's in the backyard, the local woodland or national park. According to Louv, evidence suggests that unstructured outdoor nature experiences serve the most good for brain development. Building tree forts and just playing in the woods are activities he suggests.

He also cites hunting and fishing as experiences that provide the challenges and "tuned mental alertness" that go into creative development. Playground or organized sports, while good activities for physical health, are not the answer. Adults need to provide experiences in which children can safely embrace nature — breathing it, examining it — allowing them to get to know it on their own terms. And while this experience ideally starts when children are very young, evidence shows that unstructured time in nature has positive benefits at any age.

Edward Reed, an articulate critic on the myth of the Information Age, wrote in his book *The Necessity of Experience*, "There is something wrong with a society that spends so much money and time to make the least dregs of processed information available to everyone and yet does nothing to help us explore the world for ourselves."

Electronic detachment is every bit as much of a venture into the unknown as the wild frontier Davy Crockett faced in the early 19th century. Yet we continue to be part of the earth's natural ecosystems, depending on them for our survival as does the prairie wildflower or the coyote. It is important that we understand and respect these systems. How we operate within them and what we do to them, we ultimately do to ourselves. The question is not whether nature will survive Nature Deficit Disorder, because it will, in some form — but in what form will human society survive? ■

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