

BEYOND NATURE-DEFICIT DISORDER
It's Time to Turn Consciousness into Action
By Richard Louv
Author of *Last Child in The Woods*

Got dirt? "In South Carolina, a truckload of dirt is the same price as a video game!" reports Norman McGee, a father in that state who bought a small pickup-load of dirt for his daughter and friends.

McGee is turning consciousness into action. So is Liz Baird, who keeps a "wonder bowl" available for her children.

When Baird was a little girl she would fill her pockets with natural wonders—acorns, rocks, mushrooms. "My Mom got tired of washing clothes and finding these treasures in the bottom of the washer or disintegrated through the dryer," Liz recalls. "So she came up with 'Liz's Wonder Bowl,' and the idea was that I could empty my pockets into the bowl. I could still enjoy my treasures, and try to find out what things were, and not cause trouble with the laundry."

McGee and Baird are among the thousands of parents who have joined – and are leading – an international children and nature movement. Sometimes known as Leave No Child Inside, the effort is bringing together people from all walks of life, who are creating grassroots regional campaigns, state and national legislation, and changes in their own families to help children become happier, healthier and smarter.

An emerging body of scientific knowledge links nature time to longer attention spans, better cognitive functioning, reduction of stress, and strengthened family bonds. What better way to enhance parent-child attachment than to walk in the woods together, disengaging from distracting electronics, advertising, and peer pressure?

Howard Frumkin, director of the National Center for Environmental Health at Centers for Disease Control, recently describes the clear benefits of nature experiences to healthy child development, and to adult well-being.

"In the same way that protecting water and protecting air are strategies for promoting public health, protecting natural landscapes can be seen as a powerful form of preventive medicine," he says. He believes that future research about the positive health effects of nature should be conducted in collaboration with architects, urban planners, park designers, and landscape architects. "Of course, there is still much we need to learn, such as what kinds of nature contact are most beneficial to health, how much contact is needed and how to measure that, and what groups of people benefit most. But we know enough to act."

If you're a parent who missed out on nature as a child, now's your chance. Indeed, all the gifts of nature that come to children also come to the good adult who introduces a child to nature.

Young people are acting, too, by becoming natural leaders in the movement. For example, a seven-year-old girl in Virginia rounded up her friends and enrolled them in her own Girls Gone Wild in Nature Club. Together they organize backyard campouts and bug hunts.

In Mississippi, teenager Josh Morrison founded Geeks in the Woods (www.geeksinthewoods.org) for his friends and fellow geeks everywhere. He defines "geek" as a "gaming environmentally educated kid," and says he and his friends — "tired of being labeled" tech addicts — can have their PlayStations and their outdoor time too: "We could be the generation that makes a U-turn back to . . . a balance between virtual reality and what sustains all life . . . nature."

FIVE ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TODAY

1. Go for a family walk when the moon is full. There's a whole new set of animals, sights and sounds out there. Listen to animals calling. Owls and bats are looking for prey. Watch for things glowing, like worms and fungus on trees. And look up at the stars.
2. Help your child discover a hidden universe. Find a scrap board and place it on bare dirt. Come back in a day or two, lift the board, and see how many species have found shelter there. Identify them with the help of a field guide. Return to this universe once a month, lift the board and discover who's new.
3. Tell your children stories about your special childhood places in nature. Then help them find their own: leaves beneath a backyard willow, the bend of a creek, the meadow in the woods. Let it become their intimate connection with the natural world.
4. Revive old traditions. Collect lightning bugs at dusk, release them at dawn. Make a leaf collection. Keep a terrarium or aquarium. Go crowdadding—tie a piece of liver or bacon to a string, drop it into a creek or pond, wait until a crawdad tugs.
5. Invent your own nature game. One mother's suggestion: "We help our kids pay attention during longer hikes by playing 'find ten critters'—mammals, birds, insects, reptiles, snails, and other creatures. Finding a critter can also mean discovering footprints, mole holes, and other signs that an animal has passed by or lives there."

Adapted from **LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS** by Richard Louv, © 2008. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.

In our families and our communities, it's time to take action. That's why the new, expanded 2008 edition of "Last Child in the Woods" contains a "Field Guide" with 100 Actions that families and communities can take, along with discussion questions, a report on the movement, and other resources for parents, educators, conservationists, business people and community leaders.

For more information on the Second Edition of "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder," go to www.lastchildinthewoods.com. To help build the movement, please join the Children & Nature Network at www.childrenandnature.org

Richard Louv, recipient of the 2008 Audubon Medal, is the author of seven books. The chairman of the Children & Nature Network (www.cnaturenet.org), he is also honorary co-chair of the National Forum on Children and Nature.