

Helping Children Connect to the Natural World

By Pat Francis, Naturalist, Long Lake Conservation Center

“Is that porcupine pee?” The student pointed worriedly to puddles of melt-water in the woods. We had just visited a den tree and seen scat, a few quills, and peeled branches. Now we were hiking back, and more than one student was concerned that if they stepped in a tea-colored puddle, they would be ankle-deep in urine. What a quandary! What an opportunity to explain frozen ground and melting snow!

As a naturalist, I love moments such as this, but they illustrate a disturbing trend: our children are growing up with increasingly little connection to the natural world. A recently published, highly-regarded book titled “Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder” speaks to this problem. It recounts how our nation’s children, in their highly structured, tightly scheduled world are becoming increasingly divorced from hands-on exploration of nature. They may read about it, study it, watch movies – but their hands stay clean and their feet dry.

Another example occurred this winter. A group of metro fifth-graders, out in the woods on a “wilderness meal” activity, were gathering branches for their fires. For many, perhaps most, this was their first opportunity to cook outdoors: to gather wood, make a clearing, build a small fire, cook food (shouldn’t the hotdog stick be thinner than the hotdog?), and put the fire out properly and safely. We had given them full instructions indoors including a show-and-tell of how to tell a dead branch: it’s not attached at either end. I intercepted student after student who couldn’t translate the words of indoor instruction to the reality of being in the woods. In their eyes, a healthy sapling with no leaves was dead. Snap! Many didn’t understand that buds are a sign of life. Snap!

I’ve worked as a naturalist at Long Lake since 1988, explored the natural world with thousands of youth and their parents (both urban and rural), and personally have seen the accelerating numbers of people who had watched the Discovery channel or a nature flick, but have little to no actual experience outdoors. Educators know how important hands-on activities are to true learning. Long Lake excels at this. Countless times we’ve had a youth tell us “I’ve never done (seen, heard, known) this before!”

These are the same children who will be this century’s policy makers. They will be the stewards of a steadily shrinking, increasingly precious natural world. The quantity and quality of remaining resources will determine quality of life, both for human and non-human. Won’t they do a better job if they have some first-hand knowledge of those resources, if they aren’t “nature-deficit”?

Schools and parents have put their trust in Long Lake for over forty years. The Center's mission is to promote wise use of natural resources, to foster youth awareness of the interdependence of humans and their environment. By immersing youth in the outdoors, by instilling knowledge and respect of nature, we help them continue their growth as responsible human beings. As county officials invest money in the upgrades and improvements the center needs, everyone benefits. The county-owned facility gains in monetary value; area businesses are patronized by the growing number of people and organizations that hold conferences at Long Lake (the Dark Sky Society, DNR, and 4-H among others); Aitkin County maintains its prestige as having the state's first residential environmental center – a center that is still one of the best.

As the county and Long Lake partner for improvements and program growth, Minnesota's children gain; they gain access to nature. No one should be "last child in the woods".