

What are they telling us?

By Todd Roggenkamp, Executive Director, LLCC

Almost every day of the year, I see children of different ages who have come to Long Lake Conservation Center participating in a variety of environmental education and outdoor programs. All of them are designed to teach children about the wise use of natural resources, to become more aware of their actions on the environment, and how to be good environmental citizens. Many times while teaching or interacting with the children while they are at the Center, I hear many comments about how great it is to be at the Center learning about nature, and how cool it is to experience what they do while they are here.

I am left wondering why then, when our youth are showing they want to learn about nature and how to take care of it, we, as a society, are not doing enough to meet their needs? Our society seems to be very good at thinking it knows what is best for our younger generations. It often thinks a child is not happy unless they have a computer, I-pod, cell phone, big screen TV, and an X-box, just to name a few. Society is constantly telling everyone they need to give instant gratification to our youth, otherwise they will lose interest. Yet, are we really listening to what they may be asking for? Studies continue to pour out about how children are overweight, not active enough, and need constant stimulus to entertain them. At the same time, books, such as **“Last Child Left in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder,”** by Richard Louv, and other media is imploring our society as a whole, to get our children re-engaged in the wonders of our natural world so they can pass it onto their children and help make wise choices about the future of our environment. These studies tie right in with the recent forecasts put out by our state Department of Natural Resources and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. These recent forecasts have shown a dramatic decrease in families engaging in outdoor activities such as camping, fishing, and hunting. Interestingly enough, even after being told all the facts, nobody seems to be heeding what these reports are saying; many continue to fail to see how nature and the outdoors can play a major role in reversing this unhealthy trend. At a time when more than ever families need to be engaging their children in these great activities that expose them to the environment and the outdoors, the forecasts and surveys are showing the opposite happening. We need to take on this challenge and work to encourage our youth to become engaged in helping themselves and the environment become and stay healthy by getting out into the great outdoors. You say, how do we do this?

Here are some simple yet, fun ways you can be a part of the solution in turning our youth onto nature and the outdoors and turn them off from all the “necessities” society says they need to have. One way to do this is just simply take your own children or other youth and go for a walk outside. Some places to go would be local parks, areas with hiking trails, or if your backyard is large enough it will suffice as well. Everybody will get a good work out of their legs and cardiovascular system while at the same time get to see and learn about nature. Another way to get youth excited in nature is by taking them camping, hunting, fishing, trapping, berry picking, bird watching or any other outdoor pursuit you may know of. When you are out in nature help by being a teacher showing them what is so unique and beautiful about the outdoors. Tune them into what is going on out there. Teach them that by their actions they can positively or negatively impact the environment around them. Other ways to teach would be to take youth on a night hike to let them see the stars and hear the sounds of the night. Ask them to tune into what they

are hearing and see what they come up with. You will be amazed at how much they can pick out and learn if given the opportunity; and all done while not having any of the “necessities” of modern life.

Only through each of us taking an active role in our youth and their learning about the natural world can we begin to turn the tide of what many people are seeing as a short circuit in our youth’s connection to the environment and their own health. If we do not take the time to do this, the true effects will be seen in years to come when unwise choices are made about how we take care of our environment. So, help me out get started today! If you don’t have children, seek out families that you know have children and get involved in teaching these future decision makers about the importance of turning on to nature and turning off the “necessities” society says we need to have for a happy lifestyle. Make a difference, turn a child onto nature and help keep our future decision makers of the environment from becoming the “nature deficit” generation of our world.