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# LIVING

# Children and nature

*There is a growing unease about whether a passion for nature will even exist in the next generation*



**OUR CHANGING SEASONS**  
Drew Monkman

**F**or anyone with an interest in the natural world, a deep-seated concern for the future is paramount in our thoughts these days. However, this concern goes beyond the potentially disastrous impact of threats such as climate change or habitat destruction. It is also a growing unease about whether a passion for nature will even exist in the next generation. This apprehension is not limited to naturalists and environmentalists but is shared by many others who have a keen interest in the outdoors including many anglers and hunters.

Although it is important for children to have some understanding of major environmental issues and to know what one can do to help alleviate these problems, I think the most important and age-appropriate starting point is to simply help children reconnect with nature in their everyday lives. To paraphrase Baba Dioum, a Senegalese conservationist, we will only conserve and care for what we love and only love what we understand, appreciate and feel an emotional connection with. If children have no real understanding or appreciation for the natural world around them — right in their own backyard to begin with — then how will they ever develop a sense of what stands to be lost? How then can we expect them to live by an environmental, conserving ethic, or be outraged when yet another wetland is to be drained or a woodlot destroyed?

Many people with a love for the outdoors are strongly influenced by a profound sense of loss or at least a fear of that loss becoming a reality. When destruction of the environment becomes personal, when a favourite trout stream becomes polluted, when consistently mild winters ruin cross-country skiing opportunities, or when formerly common birds no longer show up each year to nest in the yard, an essential link is made between one's own happiness and quality of life and the well-being of the earth in general. However, in a world of video games, Facebook, malls and highly regimented schedules with little time to play outside, there is a real concern that fewer and fewer young people will feel the destruction of the natural world in personal terms.

Over the years I have often thought about why it is that some people develop a passion for wildlife, the outdoors and the protection of natural spaces while others are indifferent at best. This week I'd like to share some of my thoughts on the matter along with some preliminary suggestions for helping young people to develop a love and appreciation for the natural world.

To use a term coined by Harvard University biologist E.O. Wilson, humans are born "biophylic" — loving nature. In other words, all of us begin life as budding biologists. There are only a few crea-



Three budding ornithologists look at a bald eagle on Lake Katchewanooka.

Drew Monkman, special to The Examiner

tures we inherently avoid — maybe spiders and large snakes — but little else. I think most of us can recall collecting fascinating creatures in jam jars and being so proud to show our parents. However, only a few children are encouraged to continue with these interests. Much of the time, they are actively discouraged through their parents' reactions. "Put that dirty thing down. You don't know where it's been. It might bite!"

When your child or grandchild arrives with a centipede or a handful of tent caterpillars, simply showing enthusiasm and genuine interest will go a long way to reinforcing his or her fascination. As a child, I was lucky enough to have this kind of support from my own parents and grandparents, and I believe it was a major contributing factor to my level of interest today.

Direct experience is probably the most important factor in shaping and promoting a child's interest in the natural world. First-hand encounters with wildlife and with natural areas are essential in developing and extending the innate curiosity that all children have. This doesn't mean that we need to cart our kids off to a provincial park every weekend. Simply allowing them the opportunity for unstructured play outdoors in small pockets of "nearby nature" — a small stand of trees, a fence row, or a field or marsh — can provide for a limitless number of discoveries. My own children

spent countless hours every day playing along the wooded edge of the Parkway allotment between Weller Street and Parkhill Road. When you're nine years old, this is like being in the heart of Algonquin Park. For me, this is also one of many arguments for protecting green space within the urban areas where most people on this planet now live.

As a child, I was fortunate enough to be able to spend a part of each summer at my grandparents' cottage at Kawartha Park on Clear Lake. I was pretty much free every day to swim, fish, and explore the outdoors, particularly a small pond behind the cottagers' association beach. I spent a good portion of every day catching frogs around the edge of the pond and actually wading in up to my waist in the pursuit of turtles. I would proudly arrive back at the cottage with a painted turtle or two and keep them for a few days in my grandmother's laundry tubs. More than anything, I remember just how proud I felt when I caught a large turtle and could show it off to my friends and family. They weren't easy to catch!

From where the most frogs hung out and what logs the turtles sunned themselves on, to how the mud and vegetation of the pond bottom felt on my bare feet, I came to know "the swamp" quite intimately. As a boy of 12, simply having the opportunity to become fully engaged with this "natural place,"

my senses immersed in its sights, sounds, smells, textures, and inhabitants, was incredibly satisfying. A human being does not just bring the cognitive part of his brain to a natural area but the whole person. This includes all of the senses and a large part of one's feelings. Each informs the other. Knowledge serves to enhance feeling and feeling, in turn, increases the desire to learn. In later years, when I once again had an opportunity to spend time at the cottage as an adult, my attention turned from the swamp' reptiles, amphibians and birds to getting to know its tree, shrub and flower communities. I'm sure it could provide a lifetime's worth of investigations and discoveries.

I believe that being aware of nature means being aware of what is going on in one's own locale. For a child, this may be something as small as the swamp of my childhood. A sense of connectedness needs to be immediate and personal to be meaningful. This is why I feel that studying distant ecosystems like the rainforest is a less effective way to educate students about nature than to focus on the plants and animals found within the students' own scope of experience such as the backyard or schoolyard for starters. Proximity means familiarity. What children experience first-hand is likely to be much more relevant to them than what they simply read about or see on television or the comput-

er. Helping children to enjoy and become aware of the natural world around them has very little to do with being an expert at identification. Children, at least when they are younger, aren't interested in simply knowing the names of plants and animals. The most important thing is simply showing excitement and curiosity, not only with what you find or point out, but especially with the child's own discoveries. There is something innately satisfying for a child — and even most adults — when someone else shows a genuine interest in what you've seen or found.

As a boy and even an adult, I remember how proud and motivated I felt when I would call up Doug Sadler, a well-known local author, naturalist and educator, and tell him about my sightings. His enthusiasm and interest validated my own interest and made me want to see and learn more.

I plan to explore this theme in more detail later in the month and look at what types of experiences schools can provide to help foster a lifelong interest and passion for the natural world.

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