



**NEW JERSEY
AUDUBON
SOCIETY**

www.njaudubon.org

DO CHILDREN REALLY NEED NATURE EDUCATION?

**Reprinted from New Jersey Audubon
Autumn/Winter 2006-07**

It was 1960-something and it was third or fourth grade. The exact date escapes me although I clearly remember the essence of the experience. I grew up in Chatham Township in northern New Jersey. Back then it was a rural town with chicken and dairy farms, orchards and modest post-WWII homes. The town was poised on the edge of encroaching suburbia and during the 20 years I lived there it became consumed. Now I barely recognize my old haunts.

Southern Boulevard School was the only elementary school in town. It was a large brick structure that still had reminders of an earlier age when boys and girls were required to line up and enter the school through their own entrances. Like many early-20th century schools, it had big sweeping front steps and every year students from each grade lined up on those steps when it was their turn to sing in the Spring Concert. Directly across from the school was Jay Road, a dead end street that led to the Great Swamp. The "swamp" as we knew it had been saved from being filled and turned into a jetport. It was a great conservation victory – even at age nine we knew it because we had written letters to the President urging him to save it.

It was a spring day – probably late April before the bugs got bad. With permission slips handed in, my teacher lined us up, walked us past the principal's office, down the sweeping front steps of the school, along the sidewalk, across Southern Boulevard and down Jay Road. There was incredible anticipation in the air. Our neat school line became jumbled as footsteps quickened and we approached the end of the road which led onto the swamp trails. There was a small building there with stuffed animals and some live animals, but to us, it was the joy of being outdoors and exploring rather than being in class and sitting. I have to tell you, it was the only thing that I remember about that school year 40 years later. Why is that? Because it was real. It meant something. It opened my eyes to a new world and my teacher valued it enough to share it with us. And it laid a foundation for continued observations and explorations. I don't remember exactly what we did, but it sure impressed me – so much so that for the rest

of my time in Chatham, I couldn't be kept out of the swamp. To this day that swamp continues to tug at me.

I got to know the swamp very well. Every once in a while my dad would take the family down the high tension lines and we would walk the utility "catwalks" above the algae-laden water. Our search was for punks – cattails that is. As any swamp-goer knows, cut the cattails when they have just turned brown, bring them home, light them on fire and they smoked like crazy. The smoke usually kept the mosquitoes away unless it was a really bad year for them. My girlfriend Laura and I would spend countless hours exploring sand-bottom streams, jumping from hummock to hummock and never once was a thought given to the swamp being a dangerous place.

Nowadays it seems like fewer and fewer children experience the freeform exploration that we took for granted. Teachers and parents I have spoken to confirm this observation. True, there are real and perceived concerns about letting children play outside unsupervised as we did for hours and hours on end. There are also many more distractions for children than there used to be. If I was bored, it always seemed I only had two options – clean my room or go outside and play. Rarely did I need to think more than several split seconds to make that decision.

A recent article on child obesity in the popular *Parade* magazine cites that by the time a child reaches his or her teenage years that child is spending approximately six hours a day glued to some kind of screen – TV, computer, Play Station or other electronic equipment. Some may say, "Wow, that is way less time than I spend doing those things!" But with the development of new, powerful and often exciting technologies, we are encouraging a whole generation of sedentary beings. Kids aren't supposed to be sedentary – they are supposed to be exercising those gross motor skills by jumping (over streams), climbing (trees), running (through fields), skipping, playing tag and jumping rope. Some might also say that these indoor, electronic activities limit a child's social contact thus fostering isolationism. Indeed, teachers see more and more children who do not play well together, are intolerant and inflexible and have a difficult time staying focused. Habits developed in childhood often become the essential fabric of our personalities and the more entrenched they get; the harder it becomes to alter these later in life.

Another concern that takes the magic out of learning is the current demands our Departments of Education have for testing. As a result of the federal mandate No Child Left Behind (NCLB), teachers find themselves spending increasing time preparing their students on testing strategies rather than actually facilitating learning. Although a laudable idea – we all want children to succeed in school – NCLB focuses so much on testing that students and

teachers have little time to be creative. How can we inspire young people to reach their potential when we are really telling them that passing the test is the only way to be successful? Recent research compiled by the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation (2004) reveals that the need for environmental education "is so keenly felt that 95% of American adults (96% of parents) think environmental education should be taught in the schools." In reality, though, schools across the country are removing environmental classes with the same speed as they are removing the arts. Actions speak louder than words. Consider these "subjects" to be extraneous to the nucleus of a child's education and they become less important to the teachers, the parents and consequently the children. Many would argue that these are the very things that truly engage children in real learning. Time in nature teaches patience, cultivates powers of observation and heightens awareness of the world around us as well as awareness of our own being.

So why should we be concerned with this trend that is moving children away from nature? Does it really make that much difference? Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods* notes that "a widening circle of researchers believes that the loss of natural habitat, or the disconnection from nature even when it is available, has enormous implications for human health and child development. They say the quality of exposure to nature affects our health at an almost cellular level." I don't know about you, but I know this to be a fact; I've felt it. When the day isn't going well or there are some particularly poignant troubles brewing, I find myself drawn to nature – a walk to the beach, a perch on a rock under a tree or a wander around the wildlife gardens refocuses me on what is real.

I watch my friends who have school-age children and observe how programmed the children are – art classes one day, dance another, computer another, gymnastics another and sports throughout. But few build into these busy schedules "nature time." Many exist from day to day going from structured school classes to structured activities with little down time for children to fantasize, explore, discover, reflect and pretend. As a young child I remember creating "houses" in the little bluestem fields near my yard, careening down loose sand hills into an abandoned sandpit, playing king (well maybe queen) of the glacial erratic in the backyard and using mayapple leaves as umbrellas on the walk home from school. Since my town had no town center we spent a great deal of time unsupervised, moving from friend's house to friend's house by foot or bicycle. Along the way we saw things because we were outside. I knew when the apple tree bloomed, when the cherries were just right for the picking and the milkweed pod seeds were ready to be strewn to the wind on their delicate parachutes. Recently, in response to a question sent into her syndicated column, Dr.

Joyce Brothers noted that children should be able to spend time “observing the wonders of nature, time looking at the sky without having to analyze the contents of it, but simply daydreaming. Being out in nature and spending a little free time there contributes to a child's creativity.” (Star Ledger, April 17, 2006).

How will today's children be able to make educated decisions about their quality of life and our environment if they have never had any experience with it? Or worse yet, if they fear it? We exist within the natural world – there is no getting around that. Our natural, built, social, cultural and economic systems are grounded in our relationship with nature. Environmental education is all about providing experiences and building awareness of the natural systems. But it also provides the means for individuals to learn and practice skills that will help them take informed action about environmental problems and issues. If we don't know that something exists, how can we value it? If we don't value natural world, why bother saving it? Children learn by modeling. Be a nature mentor. And if you can't be the mentor yourself, make a point of getting your children or grandchildren into a situation where someone else can play that role.

Tim Campbell, a 7th grade friend of mine says that his school's *Vista* program “helps him and his classmates not only learn about the natural world but gives them a perspective about that world that can't be learned from books. ” And besides, he says, “We do this every Friday for the entire year - it's fun, its hands-on and real.” I bet Tim will remember his 7th grade *Vista* class well into the future even when he forgets most everything else he did this year.

So here is a challenge. To all of you who have used mayapple umbrellas, squeezed mud through your toes or blown on dandelion seed heads, go outside this weekend and take a kid with you. And to all of you who haven't done these things, well it is high time that you give them a try. Actually try them with a child – I think you will be surprised at how enjoyable the experience can be and how wonderful it is to learn alongside your child.

- Dale Rosselet, NJAS Vice-president for Education