

NJAS Opinion

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NATURE, INSIDE, OUT! Nurturing Environmental Literacy

More and more research demonstrates that environmental literacy is attained over a long period of time. It begins with our experiences as young children; is expanded, reinforced, and practiced throughout our formative years; and translates into action as we become adults. So, what is environmental literacy? According to New Jersey's Commission for Environmental Education, environmentally literate persons understand:

- *The systems of the natural world and the relationships and interactions between the living and non-living environment.*
- *That the choices they make as humans and as consumers affect the environment.*
- *How these choices can either help or harm the environment and the earth's ability to sustain human and other life.*
- *How to deal sensibly with problems that involve scientific evidence, uncertainty, and economic, aesthetic, and ethical considerations.*
- *What they need to do – individually or as part of a community – to keep the environment healthy and sustain its resources, so that people can create and enjoy a good quality of life for themselves and their children.*

Since the first Earth Day in 1970, environmental education (EE) organizations have focused on providing children and adults with a well-grounded education in ecological systems and environmental interactions. As the oldest and largest nonprofit environmental organization in the state, NJAS recognizes that continued preservation of our precious habitats, and conservation of their resources, will only happen if the next generation understands

There is increasing public awareness about the detrimental outcomes associated with children becoming disconnected from the natural environment.

PHOTO BY RYAN McVAY

Continued preservation of our precious habitats, and conservation of resources, will only happen if the next generation understands how ecological systems work; how people impact the environment with their personal, community, and business decisions.

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how ecological systems work and how people impact the environment with their personal, community, and business decisions. Environmental education lays this foundation.

There is increasing public awareness about the detrimental outcomes associated with children becoming disconnected from the natural environment. When interviewed by a reporter from the *San*



Francisco Chronicle about being out in nature, a teenager responded, "I'd rather be at the mall, because you can enjoy yourself walking around looking at stuff, as opposed to the woods" where "the only thing you look at is the trees, grass, and sky." ("Children Detach from Natural World as they Explore the Virtual One", October 22, 2007). Richard Louv, a newspaper columnist from California, recently wrote a book entitled *Last Child in the Woods*. In this book, Louv discusses how a child's detachment from nature may play a role in increasing the myriad of physical and psychological ailments found in young people – childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder, allergies, social isolation, and even increased aggression.

Until recent years, outdoor play was an integral part of most children's lives. With an increased concern for safety and enticing forms of technology, today's children experience little, if any, unstructured exploration of the natural world. If the environment is not covered in a meaningful way in the school curriculum, where children spend the bulk of their time from ages 4 to 18, we will indeed see the first ever generation of "indoor children" who have *no familiarity with the natural world* (*Washington Post*, June 20, 2007).

Louv's book has galvanized environmental education and conservation organizations across the country, to the point where there is an actual *movement* to get kids outdoors. The Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection coined the phrase "No Child Left Inside" to describe its efforts to encourage families to visit its parks. The National Wildlife Federation has developed the

“Green Hour”, a Web-based program designed to show people what to do outside with their children. A recent conference entitled “Children and Nature: A National Dialogue for the Health and Well-Being of Our Children”, was attended by governmental and non-governmental organizations from around the country. New Jersey Audubon continues to build its “Audubon on Call” school-based programming and *Bridges to the Natural World* Habitat Passport program.

In 2001, when the federal “No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001” was enacted by the U.S. Congress it was “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” during the years in public education. NCLB places great emphasis on reading and math literacy, and requires stringent testing on these two subjects. Test results are tied to federal funding for districts. “Over the last two years, twenty-three states across the country have added more than 11.3 million reading and math tests to their school curricula in order to keep up with the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind.” (*Parade Intelligence Report*, October 28, 2007). While there has been some progress and scholastic success in these two areas, schools have unwittingly forced EE to be “left behind.” Field trips have been reduced or eliminated. Professional development in the environmental realm has been reduced, and in many cases science class instruction time has been slashed in order to increase teaching time for those subjects being tested. Each year, NJAS staff interacts directly with over 1,000 teachers in workshops and seminars. A recurring complaint by teachers is that they find it difficult, if not impossible, to include environmental content in their day because they are so intent on “teaching to the test.”

Environmental education should not be optional. Understanding the basic workings of natural systems, and how people are an integral part of these systems, carries enormous implications for human

health and development – and the future of conservation efforts. Today’s children will be required to understand and make decisions on increasingly complex environmental issues when they become voting citizens. Teachers need to be educated on how to use environmental interactions as a way to teach other disciplines.

With this in mind, NJAS has joined over 150 national organizations and five N.J. congressional representatives (LoBiondo, Payne, Saxton, Rothman, and Sires) to support the No Child Left Inside Act (HR 3036). This act addresses critical environmental challenges by strengthening and expanding environmental education in America’s classrooms. It amends NCLB in the following ways:

- Provides federal funding to states to train teachers in environmental education and to operate model environmental education programs, which include outdoor learning.
- Provides funding to states that create environmental literacy plans, to ensure that high school graduates are environmentally literate.
- Provides funding through an environmental education grant program, to build state and national capacity.

These inclusions will go a long way towards providing teachers and schools with the authority and flexibility needed to put EE back in the core curriculum in a meaningful way. Research also shows that using the environment as an integrating context for teaching actually increases test scores, reduces absenteeism in the classroom, and excites teachers and students in holistic learning about the local and global communities in which they live (*Closing the Achievement Gap*, State Education and Environment Roundtable). Just think, rather than having a generation estranged from nature, we could actually nurture a generation that understands environmental processes and is able to use this



knowledge when making decisions in their individual lives, their business decisions, and in their communities.

So, what can you do? Talk to your representatives! Tell them how important it is that young people *learn* about the environment via EE in their school curriculum, as well as *experience* the environment through after-school programs and visits to local parks and nature centers.

And, just as important – get outside yourself! Take your kids outside, give them a safe haven where they can play and pretend, create and daydream, and set themselves on a path toward environmental literacy. ■