

PLAYING IT TOO SAFE?

By making it harder for kids to explore and play in the outdoors, we may be losing future conservationists.

BY BRIAN MAFFLY

PHOTO BY LUKE DURAN

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y siblings and I were born in the 1960s. Looking back at our misadventures as kids, it seems like no small miracle that we survived a childhood where everyone walked to school, built tree houses, and almost never wore seat belts or helmets.



We flew off our bikes, fell from trees, and sprinted from angry dogs. Our parents gave us ample leeway to explore our surroundings, and we took advantage of that freedom. Certainly we suffered some traumas from the unsupervised outings—I once nearly drowned in a septic pit—but our lives became richer, even with the near-tragedies. We learned the consequences of risk-taking. We learned how to scramble, improvise, and think for ourselves. And we learned to play by ourselves, without referees and parent committees keeping constant watch. Instead of being safely corralled indoors, my friends and I explored our neighborhood and the nearby regional park on our own terms. We learned how to feel wonder and how to enjoy just being outdoors. As an adult, these skills have equipped me well for weathering life's ups and downs. Like many adults, I'll take a hike up Montana's Hyalite Peak over a Prozac prescription any day. So the big question: With so much to gain from direct experience with the outdoors, why is my generation failing to pass this value on to our kids?

From the 1960s through 1980s, social norms underwent a massive shift that resulted in a severed connection between young Americans and the outdoors. As young adults, Baby Boomers flocked to mountains, national parks, lakes, and rivers. But after marrying and settling down, they kept their children indoors. The disconnect between

Previously a resident of Bozeman, writer Brian Maffly is currently a reporter for the Salt Lake City Tribune.

youngsters today and the outdoors is documented in Richard Louv's 2006 book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, which has sparked a national discussion on children and their relationship with the natural world. A youth advocate and journalist, Louv attributes kids' outdoors avoidance to the allure of video entertainment, the disappearance of unstructured play, increased legal liability, and the nation's growing culture of apprehension. He says parents increasingly fear West Nile virus, Lyme disease, skin cancer, and other highly publicized dangers of the natural world, as well as human predators who might lurk there.



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The implications for the future of what Louv calls “nature-deficit disorder” are frightening and far-reaching. The World Future Society predicts the disorder will grow as a major health threat. Conservationists predict a possible decline in the number of citizens who appreciate and fight for the stewardship of wildlife habitat, parks, and other public lands. Officials in many western states report declines in park visitation as well as hunting and fishing participation—all bellwethers of society's connection with the natural world. “If people don't make a connection with

wildlife and the outdoors, they might not make a commitment to invest in protecting these resources,” says Thomas Baumeister, Education Bureau chief for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. “Where will the next generation of stewards come from? In Montana I still view the glass as half full, but if we can't figure things out in Montana, then we're in big trouble nationwide.”

To bring public attention to the issue of kids and the outdoors, Louv launched the National Forum on Children and Nature, a broad-based campaign co-chaired by four governors, including Montana's Brian Schweitzer. “Healing the broken bond between our young and

nature is in our self-interest—not only because aesthetics or justice demands it, but also because our mental, physical, and spiritual health depend upon it,” says Louv. “And so does the health of the Earth. For decades, environmental educators, conservationists, and others have worked, often heroically, to bring more children to nature. Now we're starting a grassroots movement to leave no child inside, uniting people from across political, cultural, and religious divides. By bringing business and government leaders to the table, the forum will create a new level of commitment and action.”



SETTING AN EXAMPLE Above: Megan Ault embraces her son Dylan after they scaled Granite Peak. Such interaction—along with allowing kids to explore the outdoors unsupervised—can foster a love for nature lacking among today's indoor-oriented youth (left).

Baumeister is working with other education specialists to develop antidotes to nature-deficit disorder in Montana. But the best chance of a cure won't come from government programs, he says. Parents need to incorporate connections with nature into their everyday lives and urge civic leaders to make communities more amenable to outdoors play, walking, bicycling, and nature exploration. “If kids aren't used to walking to school, they will likely be less interested in hiking to a backcountry lake or going hunting or camping,” Baumeister says. Walt Timmerman, recreation chief for FWP's Parks Division, agrees that parents, not government agencies, are key to revitalizing the Huck Finn in America's youth. “You need parents finding ways to get their children outdoors,” he says. “If we focus on the kids alone, we miss an essential part of the equation.”

My own experience as a parent of a four-year-old girl tells me that most kids would thrive in the outdoors if their parents would give them the chance. Turned loose in the backyard, my daughter will dig through the compost pile with a trowel in search of bugs, and climb the fence to loot my neighbor's apple tree. I often seek advice from other parents to learn new techniques to further engage her in nature and self-discovery. The wisest words come from Megan Ault, a journalist in Bozeman and mother of three boys, ages 9, 11, and 14. “When they're little, you have to go at their pace,” she says. “For example, when you take them camping, you might spend all your time in the campsite, turning over rocks and looking at insects.”

No plug-ins outdoors

Experts on youth say that the lives of most children today differ from those of children 30 or 40 years ago. Louv notes that kids now take part in far more structured play such as league sports, music lessons, and other activities where adults are always present. TV shows, computers, and electronic video games compete for kids' time. (One suburban fifth-grader told Louv that he likes to play indoors because “that's where all the outlets are.”) Then there's the growing fear of “stranger danger.” Despite police data showing that child abductions are rare (roughly 100 each year nationwide), parents conditioned by around-the-clock news reports fear that their unattended child will be whisked away in a dark sedan. What's more, the exurban landscape, devoted to the automobile, makes walking and bicycling difficult or even dangerous. Children are cut off from playgrounds and woods unless a parent loads them into a car and ferries them across rivers of asphalt.

Another factor, says Baumeister, is increased apprehension about the natural world. “There is a fear of nature itself—of predators, insects, snakes, diseases, you name it. People have become accustomed to viewing nature as a place with an endless list of things that can harm them. So they stay indoors and keep their kids inside, too.” As a result, kids are not learning such simple joys as building a tree fort or catching a butterfly—much less how to catch a fish, paddle a canoe, or pitch a tent.

Limited outdoors exposure leads to less participation in outdoors recreation. The national decline in hunting, for example, is



An educator's warning

As an outdoor educator for the past 24 years, Cassie Carter has observed a growing disconnect between young Montanans and the natural world. She directs the Montana Outdoor Science School in Bozeman, which serves 4,500 children each year through its hands-on outdoors programs and another 3,000 at events such as the Bridger RaptorFest. Carter says that even with access to the science school's programs, most kids in the Bozeman area have little connection with the outdoors. Some excerpts from her interview with *Montana Outdoors*:

On electronic media: “We have seen a transition in the last 20 years where children are having fewer opportunities for true experiences, especially with the rise of electronic entertainment. So you're seeing kids who are not going out and doing anything. They are not interacting with other kids. They're interacting through electronic media and mistaking some of that for actual experience.”

Lack of patience: “We're also creating a generation that will be making important decisions as adults without ever having true experiences and true focus to see something through. As a nation we have become less and less patient. Most things worth doing take time and investment. We're not seeing kids developing the patience and focus to make that kind of investment.”

Parents' apprehension: “Another thing we are seeing is fear created by societal pressure on parents to protect their children no matter what, and by how fast the media condemns parents if anything happens to their child. So you have parents who simply don't want their kids to go outdoors.”

Health risks associated with indoors life: “The idea that kids would walk someplace for an activity is less of an expectation. And with kids having less and less activity, there is an increase in obesity and obesity-related illness. Studies document the connection between Attention-Deficit Disorder and the amount of television that kids watch.” ■



PLENTY TO DO Montana parents can help connect their children to the outdoors with a wide range of activities statewide. Clockwise from upper left: Watching birds at Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area; learning to use a bow and arrow; camping at a state park; ice fishing for northern pike at Lake Frances; hunting wild turkeys; harvesting a Christmas tree; picking huckleberries. Though parents can inspire a love of the outdoors, youth advocates say the best thing for kids is to simply let them play outdoors on their own. During unsupervised play, children learn to invent, create, and resolve conflicts. Says one outdoors educator, “Kids have to be able to make mistakes. They may trip and fall, but they pick themselves up. And they learn something.”



closely tracked by state conservation agencies, which rely on license dollars to support wildlife management programs. Montana’s hunting numbers have remained stable, with one in five Montanans, or 188,000 residents, hunting in 2005. But those are the strongest numbers per capita in the country. Several states have seen declines in hunting license sales approaching 50 percent in the last two decades. “We’re still the top state in terms of hunter participation per capita,” says Baumeister. “But the bad news is that the average age of our hunters increases by about one year every year. What will happen when the Baby Boomers quit hunting? Will there be enough young hunters to take their place? The hunter has always been the champion of wildlife and protecting wildland habitat. It’s always been the hunter footing the bill. There is rarely any other public money available for wildlife management and habitat conservation.”

A related concern is that the decline in national park visitation may reduce public support for these sites. Visits to Glacier National Park peaked in 1993 at 2.2 million and then dipped to 1.9 million in 2005. More than 3 million people visited Grand Teton National Park in 1970, but fewer than 2.5 million came in 2005. “Why would people care about the conservation of these public places if they’ve never seen them?” asks John Keck, with the

National Park Service in Wyoming.

Louv and others argue that parents must regain confidence in their children’s resilience and overcome their own fear of nature. Otherwise children will never have the freedom to explore, take risks, and learn about the world and themselves. Many playgrounds across the country, says Louv, actually post signs that say “No Running.” According to Cassie Carter, director of the Montana Outdoor Science School in Bozeman, parents today are under great social pressure to shield their children from all risk, no matter how theoretical or imaginary. “Car seats and bicycle helmets have prevented countless injuries,” she says, “but they help create a sense that children must be protected from all things at all times. Kids have to be able to make mistakes. They may trip and fall, but they pick themselves up. And they learn something.”

A sedentary life indoors is by no means safe. Too much inactivity can lead to childhood depression, obesity, and Attention-Deficit Disorder. “Parents are more concerned about their children going outside unattended than sitting in front of a video game six hours a day eating potato chips,” says Keck.

No down time

Many youth experts say kids need more unstructured play, which builds confidence

and coping skills. Unfortunately, most youth activities these days are as regimented as a military parade. “Kids don’t have a lot of down time anymore,” says Molly Murano, the director of a Montessori preschool in Salt Lake City, where I recently moved with my daughter. “Down time is where their selves are forming. If you’re a child out in the backyard and no one is there, you have to use your imagination to engage the world around you.”

Ault believes that time spent outdoors with her three boys promotes family unity. “Camping is important,” she says. “You’re outside, eating good food, and having eyeball-to-eyeball contact with each other.” To mark the passage of her oldest son Dylan’s 13th birthday, Ault took him on an ascent of Granite Peak, Montana’s highest mountain. She plans similar coming-of-age celebrations for the other two.

Why are the Ault boys becoming avid outdoorsmen while growing numbers of kids their age remain inside, a candy bar in one hand and a video game in the other? It may boil down to something as simple as their mother’s interest and participation in the outdoors. “Parents need to unbusy themselves,” says Ault. “You can’t be outside with your kids if your life is too busy with other things. Kids watch us like hawks. We can’t tell them to stop watching TV and talking on their cell phones if that’s what we’re doing all day.”

HELPING YOU GET YOUR KIDS OUTSIDE

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks provides many programs for children and families. State parks, for example, are great places for families to camp, hike, fish, and learn about the natural world. Many parks, such as Lone Pine and Giant Springs, have interpretive centers, outdoors exhibits, or interpretive staff on hand to answer questions. FWP also sponsors a Hooked on Fishing Program through schools, statewide fishing clinics, and the Montana Angling Youth Club; provides free fishing tackle rental at several regional offices; and stocks family fishing ponds. The FWP Hunter Education Program introduces youngsters to hunting safety and ethics. The department’s new Discover Montana Ecosystems website provides fun information about natural resources while inspiring outdoors exploration. For more information, check out fwp.mt.gov, and click on “Education.”

Pheasants Forever, Walleyes Forever, Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, National Wildlife Federation, Boone and Crockett Club, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and other major conservation groups in Montana provide information aimed at kids and youth education programs. See their websites for details.

The Governor’s and First Lady’s Science and Math Initiative helps children discover the wonders of science. Learn more at mathscience.mt.gov.

Montana Natural History Center, Missoula, montananaturalist.org, (406) 327-0405.

Ravenwood Natural Science Center, Bigfork, ravenwoodnsc.org, (406) 837-7279.

Yellowstone Association Institute, yellowstoneassociation.org/institute, (307) 344-2293.

