

## Perspective

# Battling a Nature Deficit

The challenges of the outdoors yield real benefits

By Will Shafroth & John Parr

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To the throngs waiting in line recently for a crack at buying the latest video games, imagining a childhood unplugged from the digital world must be an alien concept. No video games. No cellphones. No computers. Yet many of us over 40 lived such lives, and we may be healthier for it.

Since we didn't have digital entertainment, we organized kickball games, rode bikes and built tree houses. There was a lot of unstructured "messing around" time exploring the world around us, in the process stimulating both our minds and bodies.

Today there are growing concerns that our "plugged-in" kids are suffering physically, emotionally and mentally when compared to past generations. In his best-selling book "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder," Richard Louv describes how today's kids are increasingly disconnected from the natural world and suffer from a condition he calls "nature-deficit disorder."

Louv makes a direct connection between children's increased time indoors - watching TV, playing video games and surfing the Internet - to conditions like attention disorders, childhood depression and obesity. He also highlights research showing that time spent in nature can decrease symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and can increase test scores.

It's easy to see how societal changes over the past 30 years have erected barriers, both physical and perceptual, between children and nature. Modern life is busy, scheduled and compressed. Increased traffic, unwalkable communities and parental fear of strangers and crime all have reined in the ability of kids to roam outside of their homes.

When kids have free time, it usually is spent in front of a TV or computer. The average child spends 35 hours per week watching television, making it almost a full-time job. Studies by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that a child is six times more likely to play a video game on a typical day than to ride a bike.

All this time inside or in scheduled play is extracting a significant health toll on our children. A 2003 study found that almost one in three American youth between the

ages 10 and 17 is overweight or obese. Since 1970, the prevalence of obesity among adolescents ages 12 to 19 more than doubled, and it tripled for children ages 6 to 11.

Beyond stimulating bodies, play in nature stimulates the mind, reduces stress and fosters independence. Making angels in freshly fallen snow, jumping in a pile of fall leaves or holding a frog you've found in a pond all stimulate young minds in ways that can't be done on a computer. Inspirational naturalists like Thoreau, Muir and Roosevelt understood the mental and physical benefits that resulted from physical and mental challenges in nature. Their legacy is our system of parks, forests and wilderness areas that form the backbone of our public recreational resources.

Colorado is ahead of the country in many ways. We have top ski areas and federal lands for hiking and camping. We have dedicated public funding sources for parks and open space ranging from the lottery-funded Great Outdoors Colorado to 41 locally funded programs. We have also created many pedestrian- and bike-friendly communities.

It's no surprise, then, that Colorado youth are better off than their peers across the country on several indicators. Fewer Colorado students watch television more than three hours per school day than their peers nationally (26.8 percent of Colorado kids versus 37.2 percent nationally). And in the resulting health indicators, Colorado was the state with the second-lowest percentage of youths ages 10 to 17 who were obese (22 percent versus a high of 38 percent and a national average of 31 percent).

But even in Colorado, we have slipped from where we were a generation ago.

Growing awareness of the problem has led many to take action. Louv's Children and Nature Network's website ([www.cnaturenet.org](http://www.cnaturenet.org)) describes region and national initiatives that are underway. The Colorado-based Outdoor Industry Foundation's "Get Youth Active" program ([www.outdoorindustryfoundation.org](http://www.outdoorindustryfoundation.org)) lists 17 organizations working in the state that help connect kids of all ages with outdoor recreational activities. Programs like Connecticut's "No Child Left Inside" and the National Wildlife Federation's daily "Green Hour" all encourage children to play outside.

How we plan our communities and protect open spaces also is a vital component to reversing these trends. We need to encourage communities to be pedestrian- and bike-friendly so that residents have alternatives to the automobile. And we need to build off of the 41 local governments with dedicated open-space acquisition programs so that nature is close by, not a long drive away.

Finally, let's remember to take time to get outside with our kids every day. There is so much for them to learn and enjoy from the amazing natural amenities at our doorstep. It's good for their health and good for their mind. And it might do us adults some good, too.