

Like many others who are concerned about how the next generation views and interacts with the natural world, I have read with interest Richard Louv's seminal work, *Last Child in the Woods*, a book that details the "nature deficit disorder" afflicting many of today's children.

By Louv's contention, the migration of families from a rural to an urban/suburban existence, has led to a generation of children that is more comfortable playing indoors with computers and video games than in their backyards, nearby woods or marshes. According to Louv, the consequences of this change have ramifications for not just lifestyle, but also the health of our children.

As parents of a 5-year-old, my wife and I are well acquainted with the challenges of keeping a child connected with nature when "go outside and play" is not as ready and rich an option as when we grew up. Like many DC-based conservationists we live in an urban area, with a backyard that can be fully explored within minutes. Visits to local refuges and other natural areas are less frequent than I'd like and require a degree of supervision.

In light of that, I recently put to the test Louv's assertion that children let loose in the woods would, in fact, find all sorts of interesting things to do on their own. On a sunny afternoon in the early spring, I gathered up my daughter and a friend and took them to a heavily wooded local park. Walking down a trail, we noticed an uprooted tree knocked down by a storm and took the opportunity to examine what might be found among the twisted roots and in the hole beneath.

To my surprise both kids took an immediate interest, using small sticks to pick away at the dirt and rocks to reveal bugs and other inhabitants. I quickly moved away to an observation post 40 or 50 yards away and watched quietly to see how long this exploration would last. An hour and a half later, with the sun retiring, I rejoined them only to learn that they had little interest in leaving. During that time, they had happily dissected sections of the rotted tree and proudly proclaimed that they were "working with wood!"

While I roundly support healthier children who enjoy the outdoors and are better adjusted as a result, my central interest in the subject relates more to the question of how the next generation of decision-makers views natural habitats and wildlife. Will a generation brought up on Wii, Tivo and hi-def TV care if we lose a few species here or there, or express concern about sacrificing a natural wetland to development when an artificial solution might produce similar clean water and flooding benefits?

I don't know the answer and am not eager to find out. What I do know is that the Refuge System offers an unparalleled opportunity to reach families from all geographies and ethnicities. With 548 refuges, many within an hour's drive of most metropolitan areas, we have a chance to engage diverse communities that wouldn't necessarily seek out environmental education or outdoor recreation opportunities, and help visitors of all ages develop a personal stake in the future of our country's natural heritage. I am convinced the Refuge System can serve as the foundation for America's most successful efforts to administer environmental education.

Although refuges and Friends groups across the country are actively and enthusiastically engaged in administering such programs, the need greatly exceeds capacity. The Refuge System is positioned to become the emotional and educational link to the natural world for the next generation of Americans, but it's up to the NWRA, FWS and other partners to make such a lofty goal a reality. We owe nothing less to this and future generations of children that will grow up to make pivotal decisions about how we manage our natural resources.