



Kids Connected With Nature Will Caretake Wild Places

The National Park Service's Rick Potts says the agency needs to focus not just on science to carry out its mission to pass on America's natural heritage - it needs a passionate constituency, starting with children.

By Peter Metcalf, 2-12-09

Get outside. Play. Have some unstructured fun.

That was Rick Potts, Conservation and Outdoor Recreation Chief for the National Park Service, charge to children, parents and everyone alike in his opening address Wednesday night to the inaugural Missoula Children and Nature Summit being held on the University of Montana, Missoula campus. The summit, which continues this afternoon, explores how to get children outside to connect with nature.

"We need to get past this idea that outdoor recreation and play is a frivolousness and the first thing to cut when budgets get lean," Potts said. "Recreation is essential to the well-being of this society."

Scientific research has finally caught up to what many people have intuitively known for a long time, Potts said. Recreation helps children develop skills, character and functional independence. It nourishes a person's physical, emotional and spiritual health, and cultivates a love affair with the natural world that motivates people to defend and protect it.

In recent years, educators, child health advocates, parent organizations and certain conservation organizations like the NPS have expressed increasing concern over the stark decline in children's unstructured outdoor play time. In his groundbreaking 2005 work, *Last Child in the Woods* Richard Louv linked declines in unmediated contact with nature to increases in physical ailments like allergies and behavioral disorders like attention deficit disorder. Louv termed this new condition "nature-deficit disorder."

His book galvanized an international movement to address nature-deficit disorder aimed at getting kids—and by extension adults—outside.

Potts, who has been working to address the disconnection between kids and nature for the NPS since before Louv's book appeared, believes recreation is the key that opens the door to a lifetime in nature.

"I was a free range kid," said Potts, who grew up in Montana and still owns a ranch up the Bitterroot. Youthful adventures led him to a career as a biologist with the NPS in far flung places like Alaska, Hawaii and Guam. There he witnessed the destruction of coastal ecosystems from the Exxon Valdez spill, the reduction in biodiversity from invasive weeds, and the extinction of multiple endemic songbirds in a mere eight years following the introduction of the brown tree snake to Guam.

Nature, he realized, was in peril, and no place was big enough or remote enough to be protected on its own. At the same time, the NPS witnessed "a disappearance of people from the landscape," until today only six percent of Americans camp annually.

Consequently, the NPS needs to focus not just on science to carry out its mission to pass on America's natural heritage, but needs to develop a passionate constituency that knows the land, loves it, takes ownership of it and will work for its health and protection.

"We have to maintain relevancy in our time," Potts said, to make sure protected areas remain legally protected. And the best way to maintain relevancy and to build that constituency, he argued, is to share personal stories of experiences in nature and to help others have those experiences too, whether it be from the saddle of a horse, a kayak or a snowmobile.

The moment is ripe to affect dynamic social change in this arena, Potts said. New leaders in Washington like Interior Secretary Ken Salazar want to reconnect youth with nature and a wide swath of politically mobilized Generation Y are ready to be empowered to lead and teach children.

To this end, Potts and the National Park Service have launched "Mobilize GenWise" a pilot project in Montana that Potts hopes to extend soon to other states. The project trains Generation Y young adults in environmental leadership and education for children-focused careers.

The NPS is also trying to bring the parks to local communities through its Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program. The program, which is involved in the planning of recreational trails at the Milltown Dam redevelopment site, provides technical assistance to communities and governments to conserve their rivers and open space and enhance local recreation opportunities.

Before Potts took the lectern, the Coyote Choir, a group of about two dozen elementary age youths led by singer/songwriter Amy Martin, delighted the crowd with cute songs about animals, trees and the great TV rebellion of 2010, when scores of kids rise up and turn off the tube to head outside.

Which is exactly where the choir went after its final song, joined by other kids in the audience for a night hike led by the Montana Natural History Center.

The Missoula Children and Nature Summit continues this afternoon beginning at 1 p.m. at the University Theatre on the University of Montana campus. Potts will be joined by Greg Oliver of the Missoula City County Health Dept., Roger Millar of the Missoula Office of Planning and Grants, and Steve Archibald, an educational advocate, for a panel discussion on the challenges and possibilities in connecting children with nature here in Missoula. Breakout workshops follow. The cost for the event is \$18.00. For more information check out www.missoulachildrenandnature.org.

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