



Thad Box

Suffer the Little Children

Last summer my 3-year-old grandson and I “worked” in my flower garden. William was far more interested in bugs and worms than flowers. He laughed as earthworms burrowed into fresh-turned earth. He poked pill bugs to watch them turn into little balls.

Then he found a dead butterfly. We admired its colors, its strong yet beautiful wings. We talked about how its colors evolved to make it less visible to predators. Then William asked me to make it fly. I told him it was dead. He said, “Grandpa, get some more batteries. His batteries have run down.”

In William’s world of electronic toys and computer games, that was a logical conclusion. Batteries making images appear on a screen is more real to him than decaying leaves providing energy for an earthworm. Unless we do a better job of exposing our children to natural processes, we sentence them to live in an unnatural world where war over energy sources is easier to promote than taking care of the land.

“Never before in history have children been so plugged in—so out of touch with the natural world,” writes Richard Louv in his new book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Louv directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today’s children, something he calls nature deficit, to the most disturbing childhood trends such as rising rates of childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder, and depression.

Nature deficit disorder is not a medical condition. It is a combination of human costs of alienation from nature. The nature deficit damages children and shapes adults, families, and communities. It is a major contributor to the shocking fact that this generation of American children may be the first with shorter life spans than their parents.

Research, quoted in Louv’s book, shows exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood development—physical, emotional, spiritual. Environment-based education dramatically improves standardized test scores and grade-point averages. It develops skills in problem solving, critical thinking, decision making, and creativity.

Nature deficit disorder is not something that just affects kids in big-city slums, condos, and apartments. It occurs in all regions of our country. It affects kids from all economic classes. It is exacerbated in more affluent households by prevalence of electronic toys, television, and computer facilities that produce “virtual nature” on demand.

It is also made worse by lifestyle choices in American households. Fear of harm to their children leads many parents to keep children indoors even when parks, vacant lots, or agricultural land is nearby. Organized programs from sports to music to other group activities fill the time of children and parents alike. The net result is that today’s American children have less time to explore, wander, wonder, and try to sort out the unexplained mysteries of nature.

Curing nature deficit disorder is an immediate, commonsense need if our culture is to survive. It will take a major effort to change values and lifestyles. That is an area where land care professionals have an obvious role.

The theme of this month's *Rangelands* is "Youth." In this issue we find papers by young people and listings of awards others have earned. Let us celebrate them. But let us also realize that they are the exception, the living examples of what we would like our youth to be. All around them are children who will never feel the excitement of watching a bird egg hatch.

Our responsibility, to paraphrase John F. Kennedy, is to, "Ask not what our youth can do for us, but what we can do for our youth." And what we can do for them includes helping our youngsters learn the interconnectedness of the world around them. Our audience is made up of young professionals in natural resource jobs, those in training for a job, school kids, and children not yet in school, and their parents as well.

It has been decades since I have seen as much concern among land care professionals as I see today. The baby-boom foresters, wildlife people, soil scientists, and range managers are reaching retirement age. After years of service, they are asking, almost desperately, who will replace them. Many of the new hires in the last decade have been specialists lacking in-depth ecological, geological, and economic training traditional for land care professions.

Some employers are turning to experienced retirees for help. Don Nebeker, a range manager who retired as a forest supervisor, has been asked to organize a series of workshops and short courses for young employees. The need is not to teach administration or policy, but prepare people on the job to do practical things in the field and with the public.

The lack of practical experience and skills among young employees offers SRM a chance to have an immediate and lasting impact on the land. We have people with lots of experience. We have a professional range certification program. It is mainly input oriented, that is, one gets points by attending, not performing. We need specific certification exercises that are output oriented for specific jobs. Credit would depend on satisfactory completion of supervised field work leading to land care objectives. SRM people would make ideal mentors and referees.

There is a shortage of university students taking curricula that equip them to fill jobs being vacated by the retirees. Many universities abandoned traditional land care curricula and replaced them with generalist science or environmental degrees. SRM has a program to accredit universities. The Range Management Education Council meets regularly. SRM, with representatives from forestry, soils, and wildlife societies, has a responsibility to get university administrators and faculties back on track educating people for our professions. We should use accreditation and other tools we have to demand that universities turn out the people needed for the land.

Incoming university students lack the outdoor or "farm boy" skills of previous generations. Schoolchildren in K-12

are having extracurricular activities reduced through funding deficits and mandated program testing. Most SRM sections have range camps to help fill the gap, but they serve only a limited number of students. Imagine the impact if 3,000 of our SRM members each adopted a classroom.

Land care professionals have special qualifications for adopting classrooms. They are educated in ecological processes. They have experience working with complex systems of agencies and users. They have connections to landowners, resource managers, town councils, etc. who could make field sites available. And they know how to make silk purses out of sows' ears.

One of the most successful "nature" demonstrations I have seen occurred when a flash thunderstorm destroyed the carefully planned booth and associated displays at a county fairground. Weeks of work lay scattered. A biology teacher, a range manager, and a soil scientist each waded into a water puddle. With pre-school-age children they caught water bugs, tadpoles, and frogs. They laughed and examined life in the puddle. Some mothers were not happy with the muddy clothes and smudged faces, but both children and teachers enjoyed what nature offered.

There are many opportunities for range people to treat nature deficit disorder. And giving to youth will ultimately make our profession stronger. Youth at any age needs the inspiration and guidance of proven professionals. Rex Peiper recently reflected on the people who helped him become one of our SRM stalwarts. He was quoted in the New Mexico Section newsletter, "Mentoring is an obligation, and we still need people to fill that obligation."

Ask not what youth can do for our profession; ask what our profession can do for youth. Our survival depends on getting youngsters of all ages involved with natural interactions in a vacant lot, on a farm, in a forest, or out on the range. We can teach many things in our own backyard. If we do not suffer little children to experience nature, we can never have competent people in future land care jobs. But if each SRM member seeks a way that she or he can mentor a young person, both our land and our profession will prosper.

William's dead butterfly could not be helped by power stored in batteries. The power to change butterflies or the world lies in us. We have the power. We are the power to prevent our kids from being the last ones left in the woods. We can see that every public office is filled by someone dedicated to building sustainable natural systems. We can take time to dig in soil with little children. We have the power.

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