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Extinction of Experience: A Challenge for Environmental Education

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Note: This article is a brief distillation of a speech presented at the 2003 Summit of the Association of Nature Center Administrators. To read the full speech and related articles, visit online at www.natctr.org.

How many of you climbed trees when you were a child, or played in tree houses? How many collected natural *stuff* like leaves, rocks, shells and bugs, or liked to explore woods and fields *without* staying on the trails? Now, how many of you recall those experiences as playing a significant role in the formation of your personal conservation ethic? If you feel that way, you are far from alone!

THE CHALLENGE

The United States' environmental education (EE) and nature center professions have a quiet, underlying goal of positive, non-partisan social change: to help create a society that lives in harmony with nature. Clearly, we have not reached that idyllic state, so our challenge is to transform societal values further. We do not seem to be succeeding.

Millions of today's adults enjoyed EE lessons during their school years, starting with the ecology boom days of the 1960s and 70s. In theory, these experiences should have influenced their adult values and behavior, such as how they vote, run their businesses, raise their families, etc. Are we now seeing resultant and widespread environmental values in the U.S.? Apparently not. After gaining prominence and visibility during the '70s and early '80s, conservation concerns have been losing ground. Public opinion polls reflect this trend, especially when close-ended questions force people to choose among priorities (thus mimicking real life). In these polls, only one to three percent of respondents name the environment as their top concern – far less than 25 years ago. Reflecting this, the environment is no longer a defining issue in national elections; it's hardly even been in play. Further, many of the bedrock pieces of national environmental policy have been coming under attack and, in some cases, are being unraveled. Although we have had many tangible environmental successes, we have not developed a strong enough conservation constituency to reliably steer public policy – and it's going to take a lot more than just a two or three percent priority rating to do so. Environmental education was originally expected to be a key means of building that broad and enduring constituency. It has not worked.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Contemporary EE is predicated on a simple and seemingly obvious paradigm: that cognitive learning can create behavioral change, and ultimately can do so on a societal scale. In effect, this paradigm says, "If only they understood, they would come to care." However, after a full generation of modern EE, American conservation values are going in the wrong direction. Where has EE failed? Unfortunately, no one has yet done the 20 or 25-year controlled studies that would clearly prove – or perhaps disprove – that the prevalent school-based approaches to EE can effectively influence adult

values and behavior. Instead, we grasp at bits of anecdotal feedback, tout simplistic operational statistics, and flaunt tangential successes in using environment-based programs to raise test scores in reading and math. All of these are encouraging, but they do not demonstrate any broad change in communal values.

However, related disciplines offer much research that can inform environmental education. For example, numerous studies have tested the impact of knowledge on personal behavior. The bulk of the evidence shows no clear causal relationship between knowledge and behavior. If you think about it, this is not surprising; we are not really such a rational species. If we were – if we let knowledge dictate our behavior – then no one would ever drive without fastening their seat belt, no one would ever eat French fries or doughnuts, and no one would ever live in a mobile home in tornado alley. Human behavior is a lot more complicated than just left-brain comprehension.

Thankfully, though, there has also been a fair amount of research into what kinds of experiences turn children into adult conservationists. This research depends on self-reporting studies, i.e., adult conservationists reflecting on what circumstances fostered their environmental values. After reviewing many of these studies, researcher Louise Chawla summarized them, in order of greatest influence:

1. The experience of natural areas as a child – e.g., frequent and free play in a “wild” place, be it the back forty of the family farm, the pond down the block or the vacant lot next door;
2. The influence of one or more mentors (usually family members) who shared their own love of nature and guided children into similar pursuits;
3. Involvement with outdoor or conservation organizations, such as scouting;
4. Negative environmental experiences – e.g., seeing their cherished woods turned into condos;
5. Education;
6. Friends; and
7. Their job.

This information is tremendously pertinent for EE, and a couple of conclusions are clear. One, structured educational programs exert less influence than the high emphasis that we typically give them. Two, *the heart comes before the head*. Informal, unstructured, frequent and affective childhood nature experiences are what most influence the development of adult conservation values. Remember tree climbing, bug collecting and daily tromps through the woods? That’s it; there’s no big mystery. So the true paradigm seems to be almost the opposite of what we’ve been practicing. It should be, “If only they cared, they would come to understand.” First we fall in love with nature, then we are motivated to learn more about it – including what we have to do to protect it.

WHAT WE NEED TO DO

The process of falling in love with nature used to be a virtually automatic part of childhood, but alas, this is no longer so. The whole nature of childhood has changed. Free time is virtually extinct, as kids are programmed from dawn to dusk with school, hockey practice, piano lessons, tai chi, church

activities, etc. Further, 80% of Americans now live in urban areas, where easy access to green spaces is the exception. Even where green spaces *are* nearby, fearful parents often prohibit children from playing there.

Naturalist/author Robert Michael Pyle terms this change the *extinction of experience*: the erosion of children's direct, spontaneous contact with raw nature. His book, *The Thunder Tree*, is a powerful statement of this dilemma, which has huge implications for our society's conservation values. As he eloquently puts it, "What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known a wren?"

To counter this trend, we need to find ways to enable the kinds of nature experiences that will best help children to mature into adult conservationists. These are not likely to be typical cognitive EE lessons correlated with school learning objectives. They will bear little resemblance to EE programs that bring children to your center for just one 60-minute visit, or even for three or four visits per year. They will have virtually nothing in common with being told to stay on the trails, don't pick or collect anything, keep your voice down, don't throw rocks in the pond, leave only footprints and take only memories.

Chawla says that the most influential nature experiences are part of children's *regular rhythm of daily life*. To fit that ideal, these experiences must happen close to home – within walking or biking distance. They also need to be relatively unconstrained by adult rules. As Pyle puts it, "For special places to work their magic on kids, they need to be able to do some clamber and damage. They need to be free to climb trees, muck about, catch things, and get wet – above all, to leave the trail."

Pyle argues the need for what he calls "rough ground": undeveloped land, not manicured or rigidly protected, where kids can play as they please. Sadly, rough ground is an increasingly rare resource, even in most nature centers, where the idea of allowing kids to *play* on our land is anathema. We typically treat our nature center properties as though they are permafrost, where one wayward footstep will leave an imprint for centuries. We underestimate Mother Nature, though; she's a lot more resilient than we give her credit for. It's true, of course, that kids engaging in unsupervised nature play will have some ecological impact, and this goes against virtually all we have preached and practiced.

But our practices aren't working.

Instead, we need to begin promoting different types of nature experiences.

- *Child-directed* – free play outdoors, without controlling adults;
- *Open-ended* – kids come and go as they wish;
- *Unstructured* – what they choose to do is up to their imaginations;
- *Playful* – they're having fun and aren't mummified by rules;
- *In nature* – getting muddy, wet, cold, hot, bitten, scraped, bumped, tired and happy; and
- *Frequent* – as often as can possibly happen. Other colleagues and I summarize these as *frequent, positive experiences in nature*.

I once read a definition of insanity that I think applies here: *Doing things the same way, and expecting different results*. Our EE results have not been good, so why do we keep doing the same things, with

the same assumptions? The challenge to all of us is to create new structures and paradigms that facilitate frequent, open-ended, bond forming childhood experiences in nature, as a vital prelude to more traditional environmental learning. If we fail to embed nature in children's hearts, our cognitive EE programs will too often fall on infertile ground, leaving no lasting impact on personal behavior.

Frequent, positive experiences in nature.

Take it to heart.

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