

OTHER OUTDOOR NEWS

Summer Outdoor Camps: The best remedy for nature deficit disorder

By Dominique Larocque

Nature deficit disorder is a term coined by Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods*. The book explores the increasing split between children and the natural world. The book also describes the increasing evidence that points to nature as a key ingredient for the development of healthy children and adults. Along with many camp directors, educators, therapists, physical health educators, teachers, program directors and parents, I have become a committed ambassador to the movement.

I devoured the book during my 2005 Christmas break because Louv's research resonated deeply with my own personal experiences as an athlete and nature therapist. How often I have wondered if attention-deficit disorders were a result of getting kids to sit and listen quietly instead of encouraging them to move in the wild and observe the magic of nature unfold.

Retired Olympic athlete Silken Laumann in her book *Child's Play Rediscovering the Joy of Play in Our Families and Communities* shares many similar observations as Louv:

"Our perception of the world has changed. Our streets and parks don't feel as safe as we'd like and we don't know our neighbors as we used to. While we recognize the need for our kids to be active, our fears, along with our busy lives and the enormous societal pressure to (simultaneously) make athletes, academics and artists out of our children, have led us to schedule their every activity, driving them to and from soccer practice, piano lessons, tutorials".

After five years of its release, I am still amazed at how many parents still don't know about *Last Child in the Woods'* movement. I can only imagine that other camp directors share the same concern as myself when witnessing the popularity of virtual outdoor facilities like the *Wii Sport Resorts*, offering wakeboarding, archery, canoeing and cycling as a choice of sports to practice. As a sport psychology consultant who works at developing mental toughness, social skills and sportsmanship in her campers, computer animated games offer very little advantages compared to the 'real experience' of summer camps. How can paddling a canoe or pedalling a bike with a plastic Wii console in hand in the comfort of your living room even compare to the exhilaration and sensuality of paddling a river or mountain biking a technical trail with the wind in your hair and the sun on your back with new friends made at camp?

Every summer, my concern grows exponentially as I witness my campers complaining of being 'too hot', 'too tired' or comment on the environment being 'too buggy', 'too wet' and 'too dirty'. It has also become more challenging to find counsellors that possess outdoor skills or teenagers that can go a full day without their smart phone.

I recently read that even James Cameron, epic film writer and director credits Louv's book as an inspiration for his latest film *Avatar*. Cameron depicts the characters in his movie as being more concerned with the avatar versions of themselves than with their own bodies. This is exemplified when Louv states his concern of today's younger generation engagement with online portrayals on social networking sites or videogames.

Summer Outdoor Camps *(Continued)*

This year I feel an extra urgent need to get more parents on board by encouraging them to slow down and make conscious choices in the pursuit of their recreation pursuits. Where I see the need for more leadership is in the home, schoolyards, and neighbourhoods from 'grow-ups' that resonate with this movement.

Is there hope? Absolutely! I am fortunate to see the numerous possibilities manifest in my culture of 'wild kids and stewards' that participate in my programs. For the past three years, with the help of my campers and staff, I have completely redesigned my mountain bike summer camp curriculum to reflect Louv's philosophy. Our camp slogan is '*Re-Connect, Re-Wild, Re-Wire!*' Re-wiring refers to our ability to become conscious of the mental habits and conditioning that are hardwired in our brain that fuel stress, depression and anxiety and the incredible healing power and wisdom that outdoor re-creation offers in transforming these negative emotions.

Unless more of us get aboard the 'play outside' wagon, the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health of our children and teenagers will suffer dire consequences. Prevention is key! We owe it to our children to re-connect, re-wild and re-wire.

Great links to explore:

<http://richardlouv.com/>

<http://www.sharingnature.com/>

<http://www.kidactive.ca>

<http://www.thomasberry.org/>

<http://www.greenteacher.com/>

www.livinglightly.ca/

www.childrenandnature.org/

<http://www.coeo.org/>

<http://www.rewildingchildhood.com/>

<http://thegreatturning.net/>

<http://www.evergreen.ca/>

<http://rewiringthebrain.net>

About the author

Dominique Larocque owns and directs the Creative Wheel Centre (a COEO Organizational Member) located 35 minutes north of Ottawa. You can learn more about her vision and her efforts of getting families, schools and corporations outdoors by visiting www.creativewheel.ca