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Reconnecting Youth to a Green & Playful World

A generation ago, most children spent time in their yards and neighborhoods. Even if they weren't aware of it at the time, they found a connection to nature as they played and discovered the green world around them. Today many children face distractions and have little exposure to the outside world. While parents are making more of an effort to get their kids outdoors, those working in conservation and recreation can also play a role in connecting families to their green roots.

Studies show that children who have opportunities to play in nature are typically healthier, happier, more creative and better adjusted. These experiences may also help cultivate the next generation of conservationists as research shows that children who have had repeated positive experiences in nature have a greater appreciation for the outdoors and a greater sense of stewardship.

Outdoor play can also help reduce childhood obesity, a growing concern in this nation as children exhibit more sedentary lifestyles. As the National Wildlife Federation puts it, "kids are out of shape, tuned out and stressed out, because they're missing something essential to their health and development: connection to the natural world." An hour of outdoor play each day can increase fitness levels, replenish vitamin D and lower stress levels in our youth.

There are countless reasons why children should be outdoors. To those working in conservation and recreation, exploring the outdoors is a no-brainer and our passion for protecting our green world is rivaled by our passion to share it with others; but in order to reach beyond current nature users, it's important to understand the challenges that exist when connecting youth to nature.

Screen-Time/Multimedia --- It's not surprising to learn that electronic devices are effectively winning the attention of our youth. Today's gadgets are now small enough that they can be taken anywhere, which means even if a child is fortunate enough to be outside, they are probably not experiencing the full benefits of the outdoors. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, young

people between 8-18 years of age spend approximately 7½ hours each day in front of some sort of screen (computer, TV, phone, etc). This is on average about 2¼ hours more than youths surveyed five years ago. How can conservationists encourage our youth to put away technology and head back into the woods?

Parental Fear ---- Many parents may have fears about children playing outdoors. Whether these concerns are real or imagined, what can conservationists do to make parents feel more comfortable with their children exploring their backyards, parks and playgrounds?

Structured Schedules --- Children's play is much more structured than it was several years ago. Rather than having free time to explore their neighborhood or backyard, children are often engaged in organized sports and extracurricular activities. Although these opportunities are helping to build strong character, they are not building a bond with nature. How can conservationists help children and parents find the time to enjoy their natural world?

Access to Nearby Parks --- There are a variety of reasons why a community may not have access to natural parks or open space. As budgetary issues become more severe, more communities are finding it difficult to provide quality recreational and conservation opportunities. How can conservationists help communities effectively create and manage recreation and conservation areas?

Examining these obstacles and asking these questions positions land trusts for reuniting youth with nature. The good news is Pennsylvania has abundant opportunities for children to reconnect to nature through its multitude of state parks and forests, local parks, trails and greenways. Capitalizing on these resources, conservation and recreation partners are already exploring ways they can improve outreach to our youth.

Just this past May, the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (DCNR) held the Pennsylvania Healthy and Active Communities Summit, which brought together professionals from conservation and recreation, health care, local government, and academia to discuss ways to expand opportunities for children to get outdoors. PALTA coordinated with DCNR and

Pennsylvania Parks & Recreation Society (PRPS) to host a roundtable at the 2011 Pennsylvania Land Conservation Conference, which focused on land trusts partnering with municipalities to promote recreational opportunities in their community. In March 2012, PRPS will offer a variety of sessions at its annual conference, bridging conservation and recreation issues (learn more at prps.org).

In addition, DCNR is actively engaging local municipalities, recreation professionals and conservation organizations in the development of green and playful parks. Green and playful parks enhance the natural elements of the environment, creating fun and safe places for children to explore the outdoors. Green and playful parks are easier to maintain since they use sustainable management practices and offer a far more compelling outdoor experience to children and parents.

How can conservationists work to improve a child's exposure to nature? Land trusts can take a proactive role, through outreach, education and partnerships, in connecting future generations to the outdoors. See below for some simple strategies that land trusts can use for this important outreach work.

Land trusts can take a proactive role in getting future generations connected to the outdoors.

Perpetual Stewardship – One of the most important roles that land trusts can take is ensuring that the land is permanently protected, by holding easements on municipal and county-owned parks and trails.

Conservation Planning – Assist municipalities in identifying new opportunities to create and expand conservation/recreation areas and programs.

Community Outreach – Provide educational programs on the benefits of the outdoors for parents, elected officials, etc..

Gateway to the Outdoors – Serve as ambassador to your local trails and parks -- host family hikes, picnics, and other outdoor events that will familiarize residents with the outdoor resources in their community.

Community Nature Clubs – Connect parents with others through the creation of nature clubs, where groups of individuals can plan organized events on their own.

Sustainable Management Practices – Land trusts have an opportunity to educate municipal officials on the benefits of native plants, green infrastructure, energy conservation and other forms of green design that make managing parks more ecological and economical.

Expanding Partnerships - Capitalize on the health benefits of outdoor play and build stronger relationships with new stakeholders, including health organizations (American Heart Association, American Diabetes Association), hospitals and health care providers.

Conservation Referendum Campaign – As municipalities find it more and more challenging to fund conservation and recreation programs, land trusts can help secure new funding through conservation referenda.

Educator Outreach – Provide opportunities for educating teachers on the value of outdoor play and creative methods of incorporating outdoor play into the curriculum.

These are just a few strategies that land trusts can use to incorporate natural places in to the everyday lives of children. PALTA, PRPS and DCNR will continue to work together to promote these important objectives. It's also helpful to hear about successful strategies land trusts and other conservation organizations are using in their communities. Contact Nicole Faraguna at nfaraguna@conserveland.org and share your success stories.