



Kids and Nature

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The way our children experience and relate to, what many of us consider our absolute greatest asset, the natural world, is changing. As our youngest Americans open their eyes to explore the world around them, they are seeing and feeling something quite different than any generation before them. Almost as an afterthought, our kids are finding the outdoors less and less on their own, and our communities are either not recognizing this disconnect or, even more troubling, are simply *allowing* our children to get lost in the Great INdoors. And what is at stake? Everything: Our kids' health, their sense of identity and place, and, ultimately, the future of conservation and stewardship of the treasures of our Treasure State, our country, and our planet.

I grew up in an urban area in East Tennessee, but surrounded by one of the most beautiful natural environments I've ever seen – the Southern Appalachian Mountains. I'll spare you all of the tales in which I found myself weaving in and out of ancient hills and tip-toeing through paralyzingly cold waters, but what I will tell you is that I'll never forget my best friend Mike and I fashioning a flotilla of sticks, bark, mud, and the like, to be launched down a three-foot wide stream, and all of the imaginative commentary we yelled as we chased across a small urban park in the middle of Knoxville.

Many American communities have that park in their backyard, or close by. Few have Montana. In fact, only WE have Montana.

Today, our children are spending as much as 7.5 hours a day connected to electronic games, cell phones, television, or computer screens. This alarming trend has replaced their engagement with nature, not to mention the cost it poses to their physical and mental health. We've learned that time spent indoors can be directly related to diabetes, obesity, poor eyesight, Vitamin D deficiency, decreased attention span, poor academic performance, and, ultimately, a shorter life span. As recently as 2005, nearly one third of Montana's children were considered obese. Ironically, in an era when conservationists have made arguably the most significant gains in preservation of habitat, wildlife protections, and water safety, we are still left wondering if our youngest generation is being prepared to carry on this crucial work into the future.

The good news is that Montana can boast having a number of already established, superior, outdoor education initiatives, recreational programs, hunting and angling instruction, and academic field opportunities. And, of course, our access to the outdoors and the natural world is incomparable. In recognition of both the urgency and implications of our kids' connection with nature and the breadth of our resources in Montana, the National Wildlife

Federation's Northern Rockies and Prairies Regional Office is making it our top priority to embolden and enhance our state's commitment to the health of our children, and to the future of conservation.

Framed by a national campaign to connect 10 million new kids with nature by 2014, our Northern Rockies Office is thrilled to join this pursuit on behalf of our home state. To this end, we are coordinating several projects that we hope will reconnect our kids with the outdoors. In the short term, we are inviting kids and families to attend our upcoming Great American Backyard Campout on June 23rd hosted by Travelers' Rest State Park, Lolo, MT. This event is to get kids outside to enjoy nature. There will be a full day of activities, dinner, and even camping gear ... all provided for FREE! Registration is required. Call 273-4253.

We are also inviting everyone to our [Evening on the Ranch benefit event on June 29th hosted by wildlife advocate Jack Hanna and Flathead Lake Lodge in Bigfork, MT](#). Proceeds go to support our Bison Restoration Program.

Longer term, we are developing an action plan that we are confident will build momentum in Montana's Kids and Nature Movement as we are convening statewide leaders from the academic, recreation, public health, faith-based, and conservation communities, in partnership with MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department, for an important workshop in Helena on June 12th. This workshop will affirm a diverse and committed network of organizations, businesses, and individuals that will seek to empower our systems AND the great people in Montana to change our kids' lives and serve this stunning place we call home.

I'm a father of five children, of all ages. I watch them struggle every day with the distractions of our modern world, and I can't blame them. I maintain hope that as we build our personal, private relationships and outdoor rituals with our kids, they do soak it in. More than we know in those moments. And as we, the "old" people in their lives, know ourselves, those experiences breathe powerfully within them and become who they are, and how they are.

Having THEM is the greatest honor I've been given, and having this beautiful place to show them is a close second. Join me.

I'm Nick Roberts for the National Wildlife Federation.