

Custom license plates encourage kids to get outside

By JAYME FRASER for the Missoulian | Posted: Monday, June 7, 2010 5:30 am |

A kid running through sprinklers is a quintessential summer scene.

But outdoor playtime is vanishing as children spend more than seven hours each day in front of an electronic screen, according to national studies by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

"That's like having a full-time job and that's just bad," said Susan Scaggs, Manager of Operations for the National Wildlife Federation's regional center in Missoula.

The organization hopes to combat "nature deficit disorder" among children with programs funded by a new Montana license plate.

Montana painter Jamie Hoffman designed the plate, which shows a family walking next to a river while one young girl playfully runs toward a mallard. The bottom reads "no child left inside."

"It's a really simple concept," Scaggs said. "The whole idea is to get kids outside."

Scaggs said the phrase "no child left inside" is a long-used term that recently was adopted as the name of national legislation seeking to expand outdoor and natural science education, with more hands-on experience, in schools.

But Scaggs said while she supports the bill's goals, the \$20 donation from each plate will not go to back the legislation.

"The sales from the Montana plate are going to go to Montana organizations for Montana kids," Scaggs said.

For instance, Scaggs said funds from the plate's sales will help support the Great American Backyard Campout June 26-27 at Travelers' Rest State Park outside Lolo.

The National Wildlife Federation, and other partners of the Missoula Children and Nature Initiative, will provide free food, activities and equipment for participating families. For more information on this event, contact Missoula Parks and Recreation at 721-7275 or visit www.missoulachildrenandnature.org/events/php.

Though Scaggs said the campout is a great opportunity for families to spend time together outdoors, she emphasizes the importance of "unstructured" play.

"It's during unstructured play time when kids become creative," Scaggs said. "We see the corner park and empty lots as kind of boring, but to kids it can be an absolute adventure."

Scaggs said she hopes the plate's funds can help reconnect kids with free time and sunshine as their schedules swell with sports practice and video games.

And the plate provides an easy way for Montanans to support this work without an out-of-pocket donation.

"Regardless of what you pay for plates, the National Wildlife Federation gets \$20 for each plate sold," Scaggs said.

She noted this fundraising tactic is appealing for many nonprofits in tough economic times. Montana offers more than 150 license plate options, most of which support organizations with donations.

"You drive around Missoula and there are so many vanity plates you can't help but look at them," Scaggs said. "It's also a way to rally people behind a statement. We just want kids to spend more time outside, even if that's just walking down the street."

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