
Book Review

Last Child in the Woods. Richard Louv. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005.

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Rising levels of childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder, drug abuse, and sexual activity among younger and younger children represent some of the issues currently facing today's youth. Although the root causes of these problems are multifaceted, author Richard Louv, in his book *Last Child in the Woods*, argues that many negative aspects of childhood occur as a result of youth spending less and less time outside. This review examines some of the book's main points, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of Louv's arguments.

Louv argues that the experiences of today's children are more defined by urban than natural influences. Perhaps the best support for this point is couched within one young boy's comment during a Louv led discussion regarding nature: "I like to play indoors better, 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are" (Louv, 2005. p. 10). Louv suggests that the decreasing connection between kids and nature has serious mental, physical, and educational ramifications.

Louv presents findings from a growing body of research that suggests a variety of positive benefits accrue when individuals interact with nature. One such study found that inmates in cells with windows affording farmland views had 24% fewer cases of illness as compared to inmates with non-nature views. Similar studies focusing on children indicate that kids with more green space at home and school have lower levels of mental illness and score higher on positive mental health indicators than nature deprived children. Such research seems especially pertinent considering increasing levels of childhood physical and mental ailments.

Louv also discusses research that indicates that contact with nature leads to more creative and sensory aware children. For example, research findings suggest that children engage in more creative play in parks that contain natural, green areas. Additional studies have shown that children develop more egalitarian social structures based on creativity, language and social skills, in natural green areas as opposed to structured playground environments. Unfortunately, even in the face of the growing body of research regarding the positive benefits of contact with nature, Louv laments that we have created a society that distances children from nature.

Louv states that modern society has evolved in such a way that children must often overcome multiple barriers in order to enjoy nature. Ironically, many of these barriers have been created in attempts to protect and promote

the positive development of children, but Louv argues they often hinder children's physical, educational, and mental growth. These constraints to involvement with nature include the over structuring of children's time, fear of violence and "stranger danger", and an educational overemphasis on technology based learning.

Louv reports findings that indicate that youth participation in organized sports has increased by 27% from 1981 to 1997. It appears that kids have less and less unstructured time; time that Louv suggests could be used to allow kids positive nature experiences. He worries that "our lives may be more productive, but less inventive" (2005, p. 116). Louv also notes that the rise in organized youth sports paradoxically corresponds with rising levels of youth obesity.

While parents attempt to structure their children's free time in order to promote positive development, Louv argues that fear motivates parents to zealously protect their children. Louv argues that fears of stranger danger, kidnappings, child homicides, and a host of other dangers permeate parents' thinking and impact children's developmental opportunities. The problem is that many of these fears appear unfounded. For example, Louv shares findings that indicate that news coverage of violent acts often outnumbers the actual occurrence of such incidents. He also reports that kidnapping statistics are often grossly overestimated and that the actual number of kidnappings, two to three hundred per year, has not increased over the last 15 years.

In addition to the barriers of fear and over structured schedules, children are also placed, Louv argues, in an educational system bent on replacing trees and animals with computers and the internet. Louv reports that educational spending on technology has increased over the last decade to \$6.2 billion dollars, while at the same time art, music, and nature programs are being phased out of schools. Interestingly enough, he points out, little research exists to substantiate a positive connection between computers and educational attainment.

Although the situation may look bleak, Louv believes that steps can be taken to reintroduce children to nature. Parents, educators, and communities can work together to enable kids to interact with nature. Louv also argues that although parents need to be protective of their kids, research shows positive parent and child relationships may have the greatest impact on kids' safety. He points out that kids who play outdoors gain self-confidence and self-awareness that can positively impact their ability to cope with dangerous situations.

Louv also notes that while obvious flaws exist in the educational system, many innovative administrators and teachers are working to bring nature to their students. Some schools are adopting local wilderness areas and converting them into outdoor labs. Others are using nature topics to teach a wide variety of subjects. Louv calls for added support for these current experiential education efforts and the creation of more opportunities for kids to learn from nature. In addition to the efforts of parents and educators,

city planners have a responsibility, in Louv's mind, to preserve and create green space within cities.

Louv's book represents a well-written report on the current state of the relationship between kids and the outdoors as well as the factors that have contributed to this situation. The most powerful aspect of the book is Louv's synthesis of research regarding the positive developmental, mental, and physical benefits of nature. Louv shares research findings that indicates that positive relationships between nature and creativity, self-confidence, egalitarian social structures, quicker recovery times, stress reduction, increased educational attainment, and a host of other positive outcomes. The strength of these research findings, from a variety of different disciplines, raise Louv's argument from the level of personal opinion to well supported theory.

Although many of Louv's suggestions regarding bringing kids back into nature are practical and already being applied, some of his ideas may strike some readers as too idealized. This does not mean that the ideas are invalid, but that they may have the same affect on readers as Louv claims learning about the destruction of rain forests has on elementary kids, the situation seems too overwhelming and the solutions too great for one person to make a difference. Such an attitude quickly leads to apathy. As Louv writes about environmentally sound communities, cities with gardens on every rooftop, and continuous tracks of forests full of wilderness animals running through metroplexes, it is hard not to feel overwhelmed.

Additionally, Louv does not give enough attention to reconnecting inner city kids with nature. He briefly addresses park reform and creating more green spaces in cities, but it seems he overlooks the needs of urban children. The book concludes with Louv's vision of the perfect nature community with common green spaces, environmentally friendly homes, streams, etc. While this is an idyllic scene it seems unlikely that these communities would be attainable for low income families living in large cities.

Regardless of these weaknesses, Louv's book represents an important effort in linking positive youth development and environmental education. Louv's claims regarding the restorative power of nature also provide validation of the ability of recreation, especially outdoor recreation, to improve the youths' lives. Recreation providers and youth workers would benefit from reading this book. *Last Child in the Woods* also supplies evidence that outdoor recreation has more to offer youth than just having fun. Additionally, Louv's work is a prime example of the need to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners. Even though many of the studies cited in the book offer important findings, especially for individuals involved with youth development and recreation, most practitioners might never come in contact with this information without reading Louv's book.

Last Child in the Woods is a well written and researched look at the role nature can play in the lives of youth. Richard Louv skillfully combines multiple sources of information, including personal experiences and research

findings, to present a case for reintroducing kids to nature. While Louv at times becomes a bit too idealistic, the majority of the book offers clear arguments for the restorative power of nature and how parents, educators, and communities can allow nature to play a positive developmental role in the lives of children.