

Green Scene: Making Connections with Nature

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(published in The Tri-City News - Friday, January 18, 2008, page 19)

[photograph]

[caption: Seeing the spawned-out carcasses of salmon encourages children to contemplate the natural cycles of life.

Ruth Foster photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Natural connections matter

Sub-title: Tell your kids to go play outside - its good for them]

When we moved to BC almost 20 years ago, one of our criteria for finding a neighbourhood in which to live was proximity to green space. Coming from the highly urbanized downtown core of Montreal, we longed for cleaner air to breathe, a quiet community, schools within walking distance and, ideally, a tiny patch of “wilderness” not too far away which our two young boys could explore to their hearts’ content. My favourite play area, as a child, was a coulee, a forgotten fragment of native prairie squeezed between wheat fields and the edge of town. My husband, who grew up in Missouri, explored caves in true Tom Sawyer style not far from the Mississippi. We wanted our children to be able to have similar outdoor opportunities...including the kind you don’t always tell your mother about.

I am not sure where this instinctive desire for contact with nature arises. The biologist, E.O. Wilson, calls it biophilia, the innate affinity we humans, as a species, have for the natural world. Perhaps, it lies buried in our genes as a remnant from our days as hunters and gatherers. Surely, in those ancient times, people who were curious about nature and eager to explore would be the ones most likely to succeed in finding sustenance for their bodies and protection from the elements. Regardless of its origins, many people today continue to seek out the natural world and enjoy connections with nature in many different ways. It can be as simple as strolling in a local park, enjoying time with the family pet or as challenging as backpacking in remote wilderness.

Research has, in fact, established that a close bond with nature promotes good mental as well as physical health. Gardening is as therapeutic for the gardener as it is good for the garden. Studies have shown hospital patients recover from surgery faster when they can see natural surroundings from their beds instead of brick walls. A walk in the park engages all our senses – we take deeper breaths when the air is freshened by rainfall and enjoy birdsongs of spring. Summer blossoms are treat for both the eye and nose. Finding your footing on uneven ground is far more stimulating than walking on pavement. If experiencing the natural world is important for adults then, surely, it is even more important for our children.

Many aspects of modern living can drive a wedge between children and the environment, most especially, the ubiquitous video games. Even a life organized around music lessons and soccer games may make it hard to squeeze in time to explore the local park. Richard Louv, author of “Last Child in the Woods, Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder, believes that a number of benefits come from ensuring children grow up with many and varied exposures to the natural world. He shows, in his book, how such experiences enable children to think more clearly and cope more effectively with the stresses of modern

life. For parents, worried about encouraging their children to explore neighbourhood forests on their own, he has sensible advice – send them out, in pairs, with cell phones.

In the Tri-cities area, we are fortunate to have many schoolyards located next to ravines and streams. Such areas provide ideal sites for environmental exploration but I wonder how many teachers take advantage of nature next door? Locally, many schools raise salmon in the classroom; hopefully, this leads to opportunities for students to release fish into a natural and nearby stream. Some groups, such as the Young Naturalists Club of BC offer programs that provide pleasant encounters with nature for children of all ages. Local hatcheries offer tours to school classes and help students understand the vital ecological role played by urban streams. Programs at the Reed Point Marina education centre offer children a tantalizing glimpse of marine life in Burrard Inlet. We have many local opportunities, both organized and informal, to ensure children can experience the marvels of nature. But, I wonder, are we really taking advantage of all the assets that we have? What I witness, in local forested areas is a general absence of children at play. Instead, I discover, to my dismay, the makeshift communities of homeless people and their pitiful shelters against the storms of life. In both instances, surely, these are signs that our community is failing to meet essential needs.