

Reconnecting with Nature - the great work of the 21st century by Ole Hendrickson

On a cool, showery Saturday afternoon, Richard Louv, author of the best-selling "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder," gave an outdoor talk at the launch of the latest phase of Petawawa's "Emerald Necklace Trail System."

Petawawa Mayor and Renfrew County Warden Bob Sweet introduced Mr. Louv, who is in high demand as a speaker. Louv commended Mayor Sweet for his leadership in providing access to green space in a place already rich in nature.

Louv began his talk by presenting highlights from many studies that show how contact with nature improves children's physical and mental health. For example, children with symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder are better able to concentrate after contact with nature. In fact this increase in ability to concentrate after time in nature is pretty universal, affecting people of all ages. Other benefits to kids of contact with nature are improved self-discipline, motor coordination, balance, agility and immune function. Language skills, reasoning, awareness and positive social interactions are also increased.

Time spent outdoors also allows children to develop hidden powers of perception passed down from our ancestors. As an example, aimed specifically at his Petawawa audience, Louv noted that really skilled soldiers - the ones who can detect danger lurking down an alley, or sense where a roadside bomb may be buried - either grew up hunting and fishing in rural areas, or grew up in the inner city, where they had to be constantly on the alert.

Louv recalled when a woman grabbed him forcefully by the lapels after one of his talks about children and nature. She almost shouted at him: "You know adults suffer from nature-deficit disorder too."

In his new book, "The Nature Principle: Reconnecting with Life in a Virtual Age," Louv talks about benefits of nature for adults - not just the physical benefits of "green exercise," but mental sharpness and creativity, the ability to focus, to solve problems. Researchers at the University of Michigan, showed that, after just an hour interacting with nature, memory and attention spans improved by 20 percent. In workplaces designed with nature in mind, employees are more productive and take less sick time. And, he emphasizes, the real benefit of contact with nature goes beyond the health statistics: it is the ability to feel fully alive.

Much of our life is a struggle to block out the senses. We spend our working days trying to concentrate on one task in the face of endless distractions - flashing computer messages, buzzing Blackberries, overhead conversations of co-workers.

Louv asserts that "The more high-tech we become, the more nature we need." Time spent in nature allows us to relax, unwind, and let all our senses work fully again: immerse ourselves in the sights, sounds, and scents of the natural world.

Experiments with blind-folded individuals demonstrate that we can readily follow a scent trail. While we may not ever perform as well as bloodhounds, our tracking abilities are as good as many other animals, and can improve with practice. Louv also cites research that humans are skilled in echolocation. Like

bats, or dolphins, we have the ability to sense objects around us without seeing them, by interpreting how sounds rebound from them.

Local communities can do many things to make nature more accessible. Teachers can take their students outdoors, or create school gardens. Libraries can become hubs of regional biodiversity knowledge. Or several families can meet in a park or other natural setting and let the kids play with each other. This simple idea has led to the formation of hundreds of Family Nature Clubs in the United States. Louv observed, "You don't have to wait for government money to start one of these."

Nature, not technology, is what we really need to have full, rich, meaningful lives. Louv concluded his Petawawa talk with a quote from Thomas Berry: "The great work of the 21st century will be to heal and create a new relationship between humans and the natural world."

Ole Hendrickson is the president of the Ottawa River Institute (www.ottawariverinstitute.ca), a non-profit charitable organization based in the Ottawa Valley.