

## **The Great Outdoors**

By Ole Hendrickson

Did your mother ever tell you to go out and get some fresh air and exercise? Did she shoo you outside when she needed to clean the house, or have some peace and quiet?

Child development experts are concerned that too many over-protective parents are keeping their kids indoors. Lack of outdoor experience causes attention problems in the classroom, depression, and anti-social behavior. It also contributes to the alarming increase in childhood obesity.

In his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv introduced the term "Nature Deficit Disorder" and sparked considerable change.

US President Barack Obama issued a Presidential Memorandum in April 2010 with the aim to "Reconnect Americans, especially children, to America's rivers and waterways, landscapes of national significance, ranches, farms and forests, great parks, and coasts and beaches." He called it "America's Great Outdoors".

Was this political grandstanding, or real action?

A progress report issued by the Obama Administration in October 2011 is worth reading. The US is developing new formal education programs such as "A Trail to Every Classroom" and "A Park for Every Classroom". These programs address concerns that natural surroundings in a child's neighborhood (particularly in cities) are being lost, that children are no longer able to connect to other living beings, and that their sense of stewardship for nature, and for each other, is at risk.

Another facet of the America's Great Outdoors initiative is to enhance recreational access and opportunities, for example, by expanding the National Recreational Trails system. Canada's federal government recently provided some support for snowmobile and ATV trails. Why not expand this to multi-purpose trails that can accommodate hikers, cross-country skiers, bicyclists, and horseback riders?

The US is considering a 21st century Conservation Service Corps, modeled on the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC was the most popular of the New Deal programs that provided relief to families during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Unemployed single men aged 18-25 planted trees, created new parks, upgraded existing parks, fought fires, and built roads, fireplaces, cabins, etc..

Outdoor activities provide jobs, career pathways and service opportunities. For example, the US Veterans Green Jobs program hires former military personnel, especially wounded personnel, in jobs such as rangers and wildlife managers. The US

report quotes a combat veteran: "I cannot say enough about how important the outdoors has been in helping me get my life back on stable ground."

Ottawa Valley residents are well aware that outdoor activities can mean good jobs. Students in Algonquin College's Outdoor Adventure Program in Pembroke learn whitewater kayaking, rock climbing, winter survival camping, alpine skiing, and scuba diving. A course in rainforest and tropical science introduces students to ecotourism and ecology principles through practical work in Costa Rica. Students graduate with the theoretical and practical skills needed to become leaders in the global outdoor adventure industry.

In past generations, many children had exposure to working farms, ranches and forests by visiting their grandparents. While rural Canada is still within easy reach of most urban areas, many Canadians now only experience nature through a car window. Fewer Canadians know and interact regularly with people who are living and working on the land. In general, families spend less time together enjoying their natural surroundings.

Canadians are passionate about conservation. However, conserving remote areas almost seems a luxury when the wild spaces we grew up in are vanishing. When children no longer can spend time outside running and playing, fishing and hunting, and connecting to the outdoors just down the street or outside of town, we need to reconsider our conservation values.