

to MySpace online and establishing new “virtual” friendships with other girls all over the country who share some of her interests.

But despite such sympathy, even envy, I must bring you back to the cold Atlantic water again. I must turn your eye outward, outside walls, outside the gossip and the latest hot tune. Something much bigger than batteries and electricity drives the experience out here as I watch the late afternoon tide pull away and hope to catch sight of a seal.

If I asked most Americans if they'd be fulfilled and happy if they could shop in malls, work out to videos, and never step outside again, the majority would say “no.” We know at a gut level we need some relationship with the natural world or else our growing indifference and ignorance will destroy our planet.

As Louv and others have shown in their books and articles, the number of obstacles keeping children from playing freely outdoors is astounding and growing: public parks that require special use permits to even play catch on an open field; school programs cutting back on recess; hyperventilating parents afraid to let their kids outside alone, who then push them into endless organized activities instead (which means those outside areas really are desolate); a growing number of climate-controlled indoor play areas, etc. No matter how rich the high-tech play world becomes, there's no way to justify demonizing outdoor free play as something that's unsafe and no longer possible in most metro areas for children under age fourteen.

Fortunately hundreds of organizations are fighting back with programs that specifically focus on getting children outdoors more frequently in truly green areas like streams and woodlands not just asphalt playgrounds. Before I went to Maine, I visited the director of one of these programs, Kevin Coyle, who oversees the Green Hour for the National Wildlife Federation, a national conservation organization headquartered in Reston, Virginia.

While I wait for Kevin, I spy the bicycles that NWF puts in the lobby for its employees to use during their lunch breaks. While the headquarters itself is housed in a nondescript building in a nondescript suburban office park, there are excellent bicycle trails nearby and a large woodland in the back, further evidence that people can find ways to be in nature just about anywhere if they just make the effort. Clearly NWF wants its employees to make the effort.

Kevin gives me a firm handshake. A robust middle-aged man with blue eyes and a graying goatee and mustache, he begins by telling me about his firsthand experience with multiple generations in his own household. He currently deals with his kids, his wife's kids and grandchildren, who all fall between the age of ten to thirty-five.

"I can see this huge generational shift. The kids who are under age twenty-one are always online. At dinner they probably get ten cell phone calls. The TV is on in the background; the computer is on; they are text messaging. My granddaughter is almost never outside. She's really physically out of shape and has no stamina.

"So the world these kids live in most of the time is super-velocity, super-agitated. The question I ask myself is how can we get them to this other world, like the banks of the Potomac [River]?"

On a sheet of lined paper, he draws a nickel-sized box to represent the indoors and a second box to represent nature. He runs a vertical line between the two of them. As he moves his hand back and forth over that line, his eyes actually focus on some point in front of him, as though he is trying to envision in his head what it takes to literally get those kids onto the banks of the river.

"My experience is if you can get them pass it [he points to the line] and out there [he points to the 'nature' box] they are fine."

When I first heard about the Green Hour program I figured it aimed to get people outside in nature at least sixty minutes a week. But Kevin Coyle and NWF are far more ambitious than that. They know people should get an hour of activity everyday, so they reason, why not combine the physical activity goals with outdoor activities and have a green hour *everyday*?

The website provides advice for parents on how to get kids of any age outside in nature in just about any neighborhood environment. It also runs news flashes and fact sheets that let visitors know things like:

- 60 percent of children ages two to five do not have daily access to outdoor play.
- California started a statewide outdoor education program for schools funded by license plate fees.
- Researchers at Cornell University found that kids who play outdoors

regularly prior to age eleven are much more apt to grow up to be “environmentally oriented adults”—in other words, good stewards of the earth.

The Green Hour page even offers suggestions on how “Soccer Moms” can become “Fishing Moms.”

But after crisscrossing the country for my book, I know firsthand that most Americans do not find an hour in their day to move, never mind outside. Most schoolyards have a dirt field and asphalt playing area, so even if the Green Hour program succeeds in regaining more recess time nationwide (a laudable goal), the kids will not be outside in nature as NWF defines it.

Kevin faces my skepticism with a well-honed stoicism. He’s heard it all before, I’m certain, but he presses on. Why can’t we have a “No Child Left Inside” type of national program, he asks? I like this twist on President Bush’s educational slogan. I like its big attitude and ambition. Perhaps thinking in sweeping, aggressive terms is the only way. Bring back recess *and* overhaul playgrounds so they include green spaces again. Why not link the two agendas, just as I feel we need to link the push for more physical activity with the need to reconnect with nature?

Before I leave, Kevin returns to stories of his own children and grandchildren. They will always live in a wired world, he says; that’s not going to change, so whatever he does in his program he must work around that. When I ask him about the mindset they need to survive in that wired world and how paralyzing that mindset can be in the quiet of the natural landscape, he nods. I can see that he hasn’t thought that much about this second issue: how to give children the skills they need to sit in nature without being bored, restless, or physically inert. Can they truly learn to move through the two universes the way a spectator moves from a baseball game to an ice hockey game?

“You have to have faith that by physically getting the person into the field, into the woods, onto the beach, they will undergo the experience themselves and make the transition themselves,” he responds. He admits that one hour a day probably won’t do the trick and that most kids need to go into nature for days on end before they “detox” from their overcharged wired-worlds and settle down enough to really embrace the outdoor experience.

I do believe at some point it's too late. As the Cornell study showed, if a parent doesn't instill a connection between a child and the outdoors by the time the child is eleven or so, it appears almost impossible to establish the link. The science writer Rachel Carson addressed this tipping point in her final book, *The Sense of Wonder*, published more than thirty years ago, way before the high-tech wave.

She first became nationally famous for her book, *Silent Spring*, which laid out for the American public in plain English the horrible consequences of flooding our environment and our homes with pesticides, insecticides, and other chemicals. Her work raised such a ruckus the federal government created the Environmental Protection Agency and essentially pulled many of the chemicals, including DDT, off the American market.

In the much lighter *Sense of Wonder*, Carson chronicles the walks she took with her young nephew Roger, whom she helped raise. Instead of reporting on the breakdown of the relationship between nature and man, she lovingly pieces together how to craft a bond between a child and the natural world. The middle-aged Aunt Rachel, who died young at age fifty-six of breast cancer, and the young boy made their way around the coastline of Southport Island in Maine, where Carson spent her summers at a cottage she bought in 1946.

She especially liked going out at night to see ghost crabs, phosphorescent creatures in the waves, and other nocturnal surprises.

"It was hardly a conventional way to entertain one so young," she admits, "but now, with Roger a little past his fourth birthday, we are continuing that sharing of adventures in the world of nature that we began in his babyhood and I think the results are good. The sharing includes nature in storm as well as calm, by night as well as day, and is based on having fun together rather than on teaching."

Later in the text she acknowledges that most adults feel they have "little nature lore at their disposal" but pushes that aside as a feeble excuse for not getting out there to see the stars, clouds, surf, and changing light. Even in an apartment building, a person can watch the rain.

"Exploring nature with your child is largely a matter of becoming receptive to what lies all around you. It is learning again to use your eyes, ears, nostrils, and finger tips, opening up the disused channels of sensory impression."

In the end, Carson counsels, a person must move through nature at an early age to develop “a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life.”

And that was precisely what touched me in that cold stream when I was ten; a sense of wonder so profound it felt spiritual.

While in Maine I tried to track down Rachel Carson’s small vacation cottage on Southport Island just outside of Boothbay. I wondered if I could walk along the rocky outcrops precisely where this woman had made tidepooling a verb in her life. I did learn that her nephew Roger still owns the place, but it remains private. No one could give me precise directions, though Mainers are famously stingy with local news and may have been protecting the family’s privacy. I drove along the heavy-forested side of the island that I thought she probably lived on and went down a small road to the public boat landing. I stood on the dock in the summer sun on a clear day and watched the boats move in and out of the inlet. It was a picture-perfect Maine coastal scene, complete with pine-covered small islands, lots of rock, and cold, clear water. Carson had to be mighty nimble to navigate this unforgiving blend of slippery seaweed and stone.

But she did, often with flashlight in hand, as she returned a starfish at night at low tide or simply lay there with a friend to watch the stars. Whenever she could, she brought Roger with her, never thinking he would be bored or tire. For Carson, being outside was being.

How can I teach that to my own daughter as she instant messages her friends while humming to some tune on her iPod? Every year I bring her to a cottage in New Hampshire, though other parents have warned me that once kids reach their teen years they will only enjoy it if they have a friend. Now that she’s a teen, I may find that the landscape alone, the time in the rowboat on the lake picking blueberries by herself, will no longer sustain her attention.

But I remain confident that I can find ways to bring her into the land and sea, into the sun and wind, into the night. My greatest fear is that she will lose her capacity to be *in* those places because the modern lifestyle will have pounded her natural senses nearly senseless. The only way a national “No Child Left Inside” program could work is if it included a meditative component that teaches children to shift with the pace of their surroundings.