

# Youth learning the moments in nature



**Pam Asheton**  
Listening to the Land

Environmental psychologist Louise Chawla, writes author Richard Louv in his bestselling 'Last Child in the Woods, sourced where passion, commitment began for leading environmental activists, educationalists, big picture innovators. Two sources came up - hours spent as children outdoors in keenly remembered wild (or semi-wild) places - and a mentoring adult who taught respect for nature.

I regret, mightily, I hadn't heard that quote before interviewing them. Yet, what's the point of nature, of outdoor's connect, of experiential (this means you get to do it, hands or feet on mud and all) education?

Well, apparently, a sense of place, a place of refuge as are nearly all 'quiet' places - a child's own room overlooking meadows, a porch corner tucked

away bird watching, a creek's running water.

Nature has the power to create powerful childhood memories forever remembered that initially 'require space, freedom, discovery and an extravagant display for all five senses' - with power too to launch creative thinkers. Steve Jobs was one, many other notable game-changers are too.

Calgary's Lori Beattie runs her own supremely successful 'Fit Frogs' hiking company ([www.fitfrog.ca](http://www.fitfrog.ca)), is a published author, mother-of-two and a supremely practical lateral thinker.

"You have to," she begins, "plant the seed of being outside as enjoyable. On one of my YouTube videos I'm planting a seed when my son began bicycling to school, then one of his friends joined him, then more kids doing it with him and it became acceptable, this was OK, normal. For parents it's the benefits of stepping back from time and priorities, what's the perceived value. It's official, this really is Real Learning," she exclaims, laughing.

"With kids, just decide to take one walk, have playgrounds en route; in parks and wilder areas kids defi-

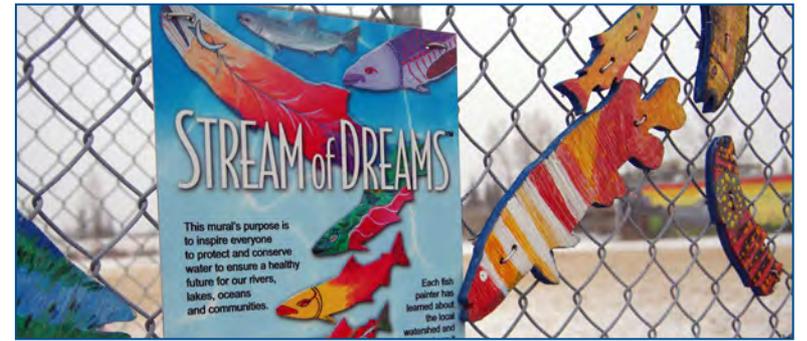
nately prefer narrow single track trails and rolling hills to flat open parkland. Nature," she paraphrases, "is involuntary attention."

"We discuss recent urban developments "which are all cul-de-sacs, no destinations, no coffee shops. Kids," Lori expands the idea, "will run around more, more activity, more play, if parents aren't around."

She's right there too; documented research notes unsupervised children will gravitate from open park areas to wilder habitat around the edges, automatically.

Parents, though, are juggling fiercely complicated lives these days and where child educators are getting a bit cognizant of that, enterprisingly offering assistance, Education coordinator Maureen Luchsinger (for long-established Ann and Sandy Cross Conservation Area, [www.cross-conservation.org](http://www.cross-conservation.org)) is extremely savvy, wildly enthusiastic, realistic. Courses here are incorporated into school curriculum - and that can be any subject - science, drama, mathematics, social studies.

"They're all teachable moments, nature is the guide," she explains of their experiential outdoors program



COURTESY OF PAM ASHETON

The fenceline along Cochrane's Glenbow Elementary School involved students learning about individual native fish and painting their own interpretations - creating a notable public work-of-art in the process.

ranging over 4,800 acres with 20 km of established trails - where over 5,000 students a year slide through. The accent is on observational skills, so that an impromptu skit for that day's opening leaf buds - being inside a bud, opening up, being a leaf - can get acted out, or being a bug and what effects weather will have on it."

"We do another one," she enthuses with remembered ideas, "where one has a disease and the others have to find a cure with native plants that are

medicinal, that were used by aboriginal people, and they have to make a potion, make them well again."

There's another program idea where it's explained that different animals leave tracks in different ways, and youngsters have to imitate, get the rest to identify who it might be. There's a radical new nocturnal concept (a first in Canada), week-long summer camps and family evenings, as well as outreach programs into schools, even backyards.