

# Missing the learning opportunities of nature



**Pam Asheton**  
Listening to the Land

In 1935, when he was 14, my father and his twin brother were given bicycles; after that they spent every spare moment weekends and holidays exploring countryside. They'd travel 12, 13, 14 miles distant from my grandfather's surgery in deepest Liverpool. Now well into his 90s his voice still quickens recalling the sense of adventure, freedom those two wheels opened up.

As one of the baby boomer generation I remember cycling pre-dawn to stables a half-hour away, of watching butterflies hovering atop milkweed plants in faraway fields. Strikingly I don't remember my parents ever supervising all that much - my sister and I pretty much made up our own entertainments - and in those days I was an urban, not rural, dweller too.

These days, though, percentages are inching up. Now 85 per cent of the world is urbanized and statistics indicate 90 per cent of lives will be spent indoors. I just about fell off my chair reading that!

Another recent generation now 'helicopters,' supervising their children's activities (and surprisingly competitively at that - 'Henry's doing hockey and basketball now'

to a significant pause talking to another parent, eyebrows asking, OK, what's your boy signed up for then?).

Safety - and fear levels - is significant factors. 'Safe' means liability, which means potential lawsuits and schools and organizations having to justify their activities,

Richard Louv's award winning 'Last Child in the Woods' has been updated and expanded with '100 practical actions,' heavier research from child psychologists and childhood development professors' studies.

A child who slides to a standstill marvelling at a ladybug atop a leaf is learning from a process developed over thousands of biological imprinting years, learning nature's teaching (perhaps not ultimate safety - ladybugs can nip!), and - the wonder factor as wings magically appear and it flies away. Nature kick starts neurotransmitter brain learning patterns, proven fact - wonder equals pure simple joy.

Children's cognitive and attention spans are affected by time spent in nature - research into ADD and ADHD hyper youngsters document calming effects. Girls aged 6-9 had improved concentration (more than boys). Even a bedroom, a classroom overlooking green space works. Community gardens in hardened ghetto areas in New York have documented lower rates of crime, addiction and domestic violence.

Young people using green parkland areas is atrophying, unless that is you are targeting sports and

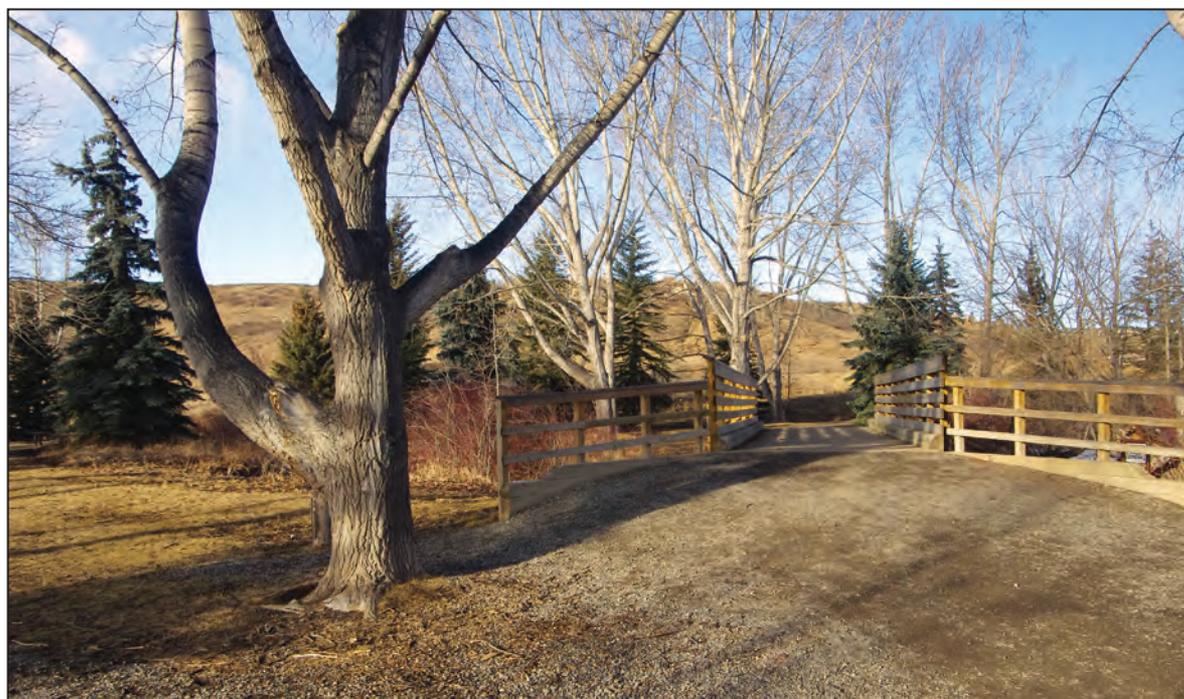


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**Saturday on a miraculous February afternoon, sunshine, almost shirtsleeve warm and there are two teenagers in the park putting away a slackline; other than that there's no one; two vehicles are in the carpark and one is mine - so, what happened to anyone, let alone youngsters, being outdoors?"**

'commercialization of play.' Most areas these days are primarily vehicle accessed—'social' architecture that's called—so urban development planning dictates how nature-connected future generations might be.

Last Saturday, with stunning weather (albeit hockey tournaments playing) the Ranch parkland had two vehicles in the car park and my truck was one of them. Two teenag-

ers wrapping up a slackline session had the other. Driving to the library afterwards, every computer had a teenager playing video games. In new suburb developments with few communal gardens and wild woods to explore - and wintertime snow and ice - it's easier, more convenient to play that virtual reality video game into a future sedentary existence where obesity, depression, hypertension wait as that youngster

walks into the next decade.

Martin Luther King Jr., writes author Richard Louv, taught that the success of any social movement depends on the ability to depict a world to where people want to go. My next column explores local Albertans doing just that: schools, organizations, pilot projects into wild places, adventure - and health.

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