



# Connecting With Nature Boosts Creativity and Health

Richard Louv explains how society can overcome nature-deficit disorder.

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"I've been arguing for a while that connection to nature should be thought of as a human right," [Richard Louv](#) told the crowd assembled in the courtyard of National Geographic headquarters in Washington, D.C., on Wednesday. Louv was there to inspire the staff about the benefits of spending time outdoors.

Louv, the author of the bestsellers [Last Child in the Woods](#) (2005) and [The Nature Principle](#) (2011), coined the term "nature-deficit disorder" to describe the loss of connection children increasingly feel with the natural world. Naturedeficit disorder is not a clinically recognized condition, he explains, but rather a term to evoke a loss of communion with other living things. Nevertheless, he argues, nature-deficit disorder affects "health, spiritual well-being, and many other areas, including [people's] ability to feel ultimately alive." (See "[The Nature-Deficit Disorder and How It Is Impacting Our Natural World](#).")

The causes of the disorder include loss of open space, increasingly busy schedules, an emphasis on team sports over individualized play and exploration, competition from electronic media, and what Louv and others call a "culture of fear," in which people are afraid to visit natural areas or even go outside due to heavy media coverage of violent events.

To dive deeper into Louv's ideas, National Geographic sat down with him for a few questions.

**It has been a few years since you published *Last Child in the Woods* in 2005. What has changed since then?**

Quite a bit. I wrote another book, called *The Nature Principle*, extending the idea [of nature-deficit disorder] to adults. That's because I kept hearing from adults, who said, "It affects us too." At the time there were a lot of great people doing great work around nature, but in the media that issue was nowhere near the stove, let alone the front burner.

I didn't know it would have the impact it has. I never claim *Last Child in the Woods* started anything, but it proved to be a very useful tool, and things took off. Today, if you look at [childrenandnature.org](http://childrenandnature.org) [the website of the Children & Nature Network, a group Louv founded], you'll see all kinds of good news from all over the country, and it's increasingly international. Nature preschools are beginning to take off. There are 112 regional, provincial, or state campaigns in the U.S. and Canada that are working on getting kids outdoors, many of which didn't exist before.

It doesn't seem to matter what someone's politics or religion is, they want to tell me about the treehouse they had as a kid, if they are old enough—for the younger people that is less likely to be true. This is the only issue I've seen that brings people together, because nobody wants to be in the last generation where it's considered normal for kids to go outdoors.

**This week you [spoke at an event with Sally Jewell](#), the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, at the Center for American Progress in Washington, on the importance of getting children and adults outside. How did that go?**

Sally Jewell is a former head of REI, and she is one of the people who stepped forward when Last Child came out. She took an REI daypack filled with copies of the book, went to the White House, and handed them out to staff and the President.

She will be the third Secretary of the Interior in a row to be fully committed to this issue. The first was Dirk Kempthorne, a conservative Republican under President [George W.] Bush, who was very committed to this. So was Ken Salazar [under Obama], and now Sally, who probably has the most experience with this issue. [Tuesday's] event illustrates that this issue is growing.

**Can you share some specific examples of how a connection to nature improved someone's life?**

[National Geographic Emerging Explorer] [Juan Martinez](#) is one example. He grew up in South Central Los Angeles, where he was headed for gangs and trouble. A principal told him he'd have to go to detention or join the eco club. He thought the club sounded like a bunch of nerds, but he joined. He resented it at first, but then had an assignment to grow something.

He had seen his mother break up concrete behind their house to grow chilis to eat. So he grew a jalapeno chili plant and took it home to show her that he could nurture life too. That plant, and later an eco club trip to the Grand Tetons, changed his life. He is now an environmentalist and head of the [Natural Leaders Network](#), which is part of the Children & Nature Network. He is also a National Geographic explorer and has spoken at the White House twice.

So nature can transform your life. He found not only nature, he found people through nature. He reconnected to South Central in a new way.

### **How can city dwellers connect with nature?**

As of 2008 more people lived in cities than the countryside. That marked a huge moment in human history, and it means one of two things: Either the human connection to nature will continue to fade, or it means the beginning of a new kind of city.

One way is through "biophilic design" [nature-inspired design], which is the incorporation of nature where we live, work, learn, and play, not only as something we drive an hour to visit. Not only parks, but also in the way we design our neighborhoods, our backyards, and our buildings.

I believe cities can become engines of biodiversity. It starts with planting a lot of native plants, which revive the food chain and bring back butterfly and bird migration routes.

The word "sustainability" is problematic, because to most people it means stasis, survival, and energy efficiency. We have to do those things, but that only goes so far in igniting the imagination. Increasingly, I talk about a "nature-rich society," a different way to look at the future that is not just about survival, but about something much better.

### **How do we get to a greener future?**

I visited the Martin Luther King memorial yesterday. King demonstrated and said that any movement will fail if it can't paint a picture of a world people will want to go to. That world has to be more than energy efficient, it must be a better civilization.

I think we're in a cultural depression. The number one young adult literature genre today is something called dystopic fiction, which portrays a postapocalyptic world in which vampires aren't even having a good time. I have a theory that most Americans carry images of the far future that look a lot like Blade Runner and Mad Max. If those are the dominating images, and we don't have a balancing set of images of a great future, then we better be careful what we imagine.

**You have written about the impacts of "nature time" on problems like anxiety, depression, ADD, and obesity. How important is that?**

If you look at a new body of research on depression, ADD, physical health, child obesity, and the epidemic of inactivity, nature is a good antidote to all of that. I didn't coin it, but I like the phrase "sitting is the new smoking," because new evidence shows that sitting long hours every day can have serious health risks similar to those caused by smoking.

Researchers at the University of Illinois are investigating whether time in the woods could be used to supplement treatment of ADD. [A study](#) at the University of Kansas found that young people who backpacked for three days showed higher creativity and cognitive abilities. People in hospitals who can see a natural landscape have been shown to get better faster.

As an antidote, we need to figure out ways to increase nature time even as technology increases. It has to be a conscious decision.

**Speaking of technology, how much are "screens" like TV, the Internet, video games, and smartphones to blame for keeping kids indoors?**

I always resist demonizing technology and video games, specifically, partly because when people write about this issue they go immediately to that. But then they ignore these other things, like "stranger danger" [Louv has argued that sensationalist media has made parents fearful of letting children go outside] and bad urban design, the fact that our education system needs a lot of work, the fact that we are canceling recess and field trips—there are a lot of other reasons out there.

Having said that, there's no doubt that electronics have something to do with this. The Kaiser Foundation found that kids spend 53 hours a week plugged in to some kind of electronic medium, and I imagine that's true of adults too. I have an iPhone and iPad, I spend a lot of time with screens, but I think the more hightech our lives become, the more nature we need as a balancing agent.

**How can parents know if their kids might suffer from nature-deficit disorder? Are there warning signs?**

I don't think this is something that can be reduced to individual symptoms in individual children. I've always felt it was a more generalized issue, a disorder of society that has implications for all of us.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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