

# Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder, by Richard Louv (2005)

## Book Summary:

"If a geographic place rapidly changes in a way that demeans its natural integrity, then children's early attachment to land is at risk. If children do not attach to the land, they will not reap the psychological and spiritual benefits they can glean from nature, nor will they feel a long term commitment to the environment, to the place. This lack of attachment will exacerbate the very conditions that created the sense of disengagement in the first place – fuelling a tragic spiral in which our children and the natural world are increasingly detached. Passion does not arrive on a videotape or on a CD; passion is personal. Passion is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart. If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment, we must also save an endangered indicator species: the child in nature".

## Key Extracts / Quotes:

"Within the space of a few decades, the way children understand and experience nature has changed radically. The polarity of the relationship has reversed. Today, kids are aware of the global threats to the environment – but their physical contact, their intimacy with nature, is fading. That's exactly the opposite of how it was when I was a child" (Page 1).

"A kid today can likely tell you about the Amazon rain forest – but not about the last time he or she explored the woods in solitude, or lay in a field listening to the wind and watching the clouds move" (Page 1).

"This book explores the increasing divide between the young and the natural world, and the environmental, social, psychological and spiritual implications of that change. It also describes the accumulating research that reveals the necessity of contact with nature for health child – and adult – development" (Page 2).

Yet, at the very moment that the bond is breaking between the young and the natural world, a growing body of research links our mental, physical and spiritual health directly to our association with nature – in positive ways. Several of these studies suggest that thoughtful exposure of youngsters to nature can even be a powerful form of therapy for attention deficit disorders and other maladies. As one scientist puts it, we can now assume that just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature" (Page 3).

How the young respond to nature, and how they raise their own children, will shape the configurations and conditions of our cities, homes – our daily lives (Page 3).

"Parents, educators, other adults, institutions – the culture itself – may say one thing to children about nature's gifts, but so many of our actions and messages – especially the ones we cannot hear ourselves deliver – are different. And Children hear very well." Page

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In the space of a century, the American experience of nature – culturally influential around the world – has gone from direct utilitarianism, to romantic attachment to electronic detachment.

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If endangered and threatened species are to co-exist with humans, adults and children need to tread lightly. But poor land use decision, which reduce accessible nature in cities, do far more damage to the environment than do children. ....As open space shrinks, over use increases. ....The disappearance of accessible open space escalates the pressure on those few natural places that remain. Local flora is trampled, fauna die or relocate, and nature hungry people follow in their four wheel drive vehicles or on their motorcycles. Meanwhile the regulatory message is clear: islands of nature that are left by the graders are to be seen, not touched. The cumulative impact of development, multiplying park rules, well meaning (and usually necessary) environmental regulations (.....) sends a chilling message to our children that their free range play is unwelcome (....).

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'Nature deficit disorder'. Our culture is so top heavy with jargon, so dependent on the "illness model", that I hesitate to introduce this term. It describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. (.....) But deficit is only one side of the coin (.....). New research focuses not so much on what is lost when nature fades, but on what is gained in the presences of the natural world. There is a great need to .....awaken and inspire the parents' pleasure with nature play". Such knowledge may inspire us to choose a different path, one that leads to a nature-child reunion.

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Today, we find ourselves continually on the alert, chased by an unending stampede of two thousand pound automobiles and four thousand pound SUVs. Even inside our homes the assault continues, with unsettling, threatening images charging through the television cable into our living and bedrooms. At the same time the urban and suburban landscape is rapidly being stripped of its peace-inducing elements: nature. A widening circle of researchers believes that the loss of natural habitat, or the disconnection from nature even when it is available, has enormous implications for human and child development. They say the quality of exposure to nature affects our health at an almost cellular level.

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Over two thousand years ago, Chinese Taoists created gardens and greenhouses the believed to be beneficial for health. By 1699, the book *English Gardener* advised the reader to spend "spare time in the garden, either digging, setting out, or weeding; there is no better way to preserve your health.

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Adults, too, seem to benefit from "recess" in natural settings. Researchers in English and Sweden have found that joggers who exercise in a natural green setting with trees, foliage and landscape views feel more restored, and less anxious, angry and depressed than people who burn the same amount of calories in gyms or other built settings.

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Nature is often overlooked as a healing balm for the emotional hardships in a child's life. You'll likely never see a slick commercial for nature therapy, as you do for the latest anti-

depressant pharmaceuticals. But parents, educators and health workers need to know what a useful antidote to emotional and physical stress nature can be. Especially now.

Others argue that increased awareness of nature's power to improve physical and emotional health should also guide the way classrooms are conceived.....

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Few of us are about to trade our air-conditioners for fans. But one price of progress is seldom mentioned: a diminished life of the senses. Like the boys of the hood, as human beings we need direct natural experiences; we require fully activated senses in order to feel fully alive. 21<sup>st</sup> century Western Culture accepts the view that because of omnipresent technology we are awash with data. But in this information age, vital information is missing. Nature is about smelling, hearing, tasting, seeing below the "transparent mucous paper in which the world like a bon-bon is wrapped so carefully that we can never get at it as D H Lawrence put it.

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It doesn't take an encounter with a mountain lion for us to recognize that our sensory world has shrunk. The information age is, in fact, a myth....Our indoor life feels downsized, as if its lost a dimension or two. Yes, we're enamoured of our gadgets – our cell phones connected to our digital cameras connected to our laptops connected to an email spewing satellite transponder.....But the quality of life isn't measured only by what we gain but also what we trade for it.

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True, our experience of natural landscape "often occurs within an automobile looking out. But now even that visual connection is optional. Why do so many Americans say they want children to watch less TV yet continue to expand the opportunities for them to watch it (cars, mobile laptops, etc)? More important, why do so many people no longer consider the physical world worth watching?

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"What I see in American today, is an almost religious zeal for the technological approach to every facet of life. This faith transcends mere love for new machines. It's a value system, a way of thinking, and it can become delusional."

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"We've been sold a bill of goods – especially parents – about how valuable computer based learning experience is. We are creatures identified by what we do with our hands". Much of our learning comes from doing, from making, from feeling with our hands; and though many would like to believe otherwise, the world is not entirely available from a keyboard.

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America's genius has been nurtured by nature – by space, both physical and mental. What happens when future generations are so restricted that they no longer have room to stretch? One might argue that the Internet has replaced the woods, in terms of inventive space, but no electronic environment stimulates all the senses. So far, Microsoft sells no match for nature's code.

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In the US, as the federal and state governments and local school boards have pushed for higher test scores in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, nearly 40% of US schools either eliminated or were considering eliminating recess.

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Even without corroborating evidence or institutional help, many parents notice significant changes in their children's stress levels and hyperactivity when they spend time outside. Neurologically, human beings haven't caught up with today's over stimulating environment. Getting kids out in nature can make a difference.

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Nature holds attention restoration powers, regardless of age. Studies have revealed that children in 'green' day care, who played outside every day regardless of weather, had better motor coordination and more ability to concentrate.

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So where has all the "free" time gone or shifted to? In recent years, several studies have offered a fairly clear snapshot of time use. Researchers found that between 1981 and 2003 children during a typical week lost over nine hours of discretionary time. They spent less time in unstructured indoor and outdoor play, computer use doubled.

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By taking nature experience out of the leisure column and placing it in the health column, we are more likely to take our children on that hike. Such a change in outlook is crucial.

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Ironically, a generation of parents fixated on being buff is raising a generation of physical weaklings. 2/3 of US children can't pass a basic physical, 40% of boys and 70% of girls cannot manage more than one pull up, and 40% show early signs of heart and circulation problems. So where is the greatest danger: outdoors, in the woods and trees, or indoors on the computer or on the couch in front of the TV?

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'Ecophobia' is fear of ecological deterioration. While laudable in their intent, regrettably these negative and doomsday approaches to all things environmental is having an unforeseen impact: children will learn that by recycling their magazines and milk cartons they can help save the planet, and they'll grow up responsible stewards of the earth. But is that enough? Or do the questions lie deeper; are they more intrinsically based? If we fill our classrooms with examples of environmental abuse, we may be engendering a subtle form of disassociation. In our zest for making them aware of and responsible for the world's problems, we cut our children off from their roots. Lacking direct experience with nature, children begin to associate it with fear, apocalypse, not joy and wonder. My fear is that our environmentally correct curriculum similarly ends up distancing children from, rather than connecting them with, the natural world.

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Progress can also be measured by our interactions with nature and its preservation. Can we teach children to look at a flower, and see all the things it represents: beauty, the health of an ecosystem and the potential for healing?

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As the care of nature increasingly becomes an intellectual concept severed from the joyful (youthful) experience of the outdoors, you have to wonder: where will future environmentalists come from?

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If a geographic place rapidly changes in a way that demeans its natural integrity, then children's early attachment to land is at risk. If children do not attach to the land, they will not reap the psychological and spiritual benefits they can glean from nature, nor will they feel a long term commitment to the environment, to the place. This lack of attachment will exacerbate the very conditions that created the sense of disengagement in the first place – fuelling a tragic spiral in which our children and the natural world are increasingly detached. Passion does not arrive on a videotape or on a CD; passion is personal. Passion is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart. If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment, we must also save an endangered indicator species: the child in nature.

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Parents already feel besieged by the difficulty of balancing work and family life. Understandably they may resist the idea of adding any to-dos to their long list of chores. So here is another way of viewing the challenge: nature as antidote. Stress reduction, greater physical health, a deeper sense of spirit, more creativity, a sense of play, even a safer life – these are the rewards that await a family when it invites more nature into children's lives.

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Robert F Kennedy Jnr said to me "We're part of nature.....and if we separate ourselves from that, we're separating ourselves from our history, from the things that tie us together. We don't want to live in a world where there are no recreational fishermen, where we've lost touch with the seasons, the tides, the things that connect us – to ten thousand generations of human beings that were here before there were laptops, and ultimately connect us to God.....Nature is what connects us, this is what connects humanity, this is what we have in common. It's not the Internet, it's the oceans".

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Ideally school nature programs will go beyond curriculum or field trips; they will involve the initial, physical design of a new school; or the retrofitting of an old school with play-scapes that incorporate nature into the central design principle.

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Schools too are being transformed. Zurich is redesigning its schools, breaking up concrete surfaces around the buildings and planting trees and grass. Through a system using mirrors, students in the classrooms of one school can see and monitor the solar voltaic system and the life of the green roof.