

Taking Steps Towards Eliminating the Nature- Deficit Disorder in our Community

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Abstract

There is a disorder targeting today's youth with no vaccination or technological advancement to provide a cure. Instead, treatment is freely lying outside the confines of buildings and in the prairies, forests, and mountains of the Earth. The nature-deficit disorder is a national trend showing up in children, demonstrating a decreasing exposure to nature. With the creation of the No Child Left Inside Act of 2007, a fuse of organizations, institutions, and agencies are demanding attention and action from the government in order to bridge the environmental education gap prevalent in today's public schools. With the knowledge, power and background of students engaged in higher education, the movement to reduce the disorder in younger generations can be carried out in local communities, especially college towns. My project attempts to address this issue in Northampton by strengthening the partnership between Smith students and the young students at the Campus School through the planning of a couple of outdoor events. Though the actual events were unable to take place, I was able acquire recommendations for the existence of similar events for the future.

Introduction

When compared to the youth of today, yesterday's generations were thought to have embraced all that nature had to offer. Back then, children climbed trees and went fishing with their fathers. They grew up with a spiritual connection to the forest, and then learned to fight for the wilderness regions of the world. They also grew old with the expectation that they would pass that love on to their children, and they to their children's children. That was the plan. But somewhere after the

1980's, a disconnection between the natural environmental and children began to formulate (Louv, 2008). Children began to grow indoors with the television and pop culture media serving as not only their source of entertainment, but their connection to world affairs. This understanding and vision of the world manifested itself, not in news broadcasts, but as backdrops to television shows, video games, and Internet ads. The technological revolution advanced our quality of life, but it also hindered the connections made in the early stages of our life with nature. American families chose to learn indoors, play indoors, and experience life indoors, all the while creating this perception that the wildness that makes up the outside could be seen from the calm and controlled areas of the inside. What we are passing on is not the love for nature, but a separation from it that has taken the form of a nature-deficit disorder (Louv, 2008).

Important to note, the disorder is not a clinical diagnosis, but a cultural disease being inherited by the generations of tomorrow. The nature-deficit disorder is a term coined by author Richard Louv explaining how children are growing up without enough opportunities to go outside. The lack of time spent in the outdoors has been linked to the development of behavioral and health problems such as obesity and depression, while also creating a deep misunderstanding of the natural environment (Louv, 2008). As the disorder gained popularity, organizations across the nation began to show their support for more outdoor programming and opportunities not just in our communities, but in our schools.

In 2001, the Bush Administration formulated and passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The Act attempted to higher the standards of learning in public

schools by creating core subjects in reading, math and science, and applying an outcome-based technique in which each state was required to implement standardized testing (PL 107-110). What the Act failed to do was provide support for environmental education (NCLI Coalition, 2009). After eight years since its implementation, the NCLB has had major effects on the learning experiences of young students. Because standardized testing results reflect back upon the efficiency of the state, cities, and teachers, a large portion of the academic year is dedicated to extensive preparation for testing. Less emphasis is placed on the arts and environmental education in order to focus on the core subjects of the NCLB.

Another issue becoming increasingly and frighteningly common in schools is the reduction and sometimes, elimination of recess periods. Studies have shown that students are more prone to behave inappropriately when their recess periods were taken away (Ridgway et. al, 2008). Yet, there are schools around the country that are keeping students indoors during the normal recess periods as a punishment for incomplete work (Louv, 2008). An act like this is only a short-term solution (if one can call it a solution at all) with long-term consequences. To eliminate these types of ordeals from occurring and in order to close the ecoliteracy gap in public schools, environmental, educational, and political organizations have united to formulate a new bill, the No Child Left Inside (NCLI) Act. The NCLI will help create new environmental programs and centers through grants, help teachers and educators incorporate environmental education into their curriculum, and extend its aid to agencies, businesses, and non-profit organizations seeking to promote environmental education. While the original bill was introduced in 2007, the house

and senate version was reintroduced to Congress on April 22, 2009. Its action is still being awaited.

While the NCLI and the nature-deficit disorder are at the national-level, the only way to truly tackle such issues and help support bills like the NCLI is by working at the local level. Smith College has a great resource available to its students with the existence of the Outdoor Program and Club, as well as the climbing and boat facilities. The college also has a partnership with the staff and K-6 grade students at the Smith College Campus School. With the guidance of the NCLI Coalition and Louv's book, *Last Child Left in the Woods*, my goal was to address these issues in our own community in Northampton by 1) having the college sign on as a member of the NCLI coalition of which Hampshire College's Outdoor Program is already a member of, 2) construct an outdoor event plan geared towards children that can be used by Smith College's Environmental Science & Policy minors (and one day, majors), education minors and majors, leaders, educators, and outdoor enthusiasts, and 3) provide a starting guide and recommendation for the college and future students desiring to tackle the disorder through action.

Methodology

In order to address the problem, I first had to assume that the children in Northampton had inherited the disorder. Once the assumption was made, the planning portion of the project was carried out by a compilation of letters, e-mails, and interviews with key staff at Smith College and at the Campus School. The list of Smith contacts included President Carol Christ, the Outdoor Adventure Program

Director Scott Johnson, and both Outdoor Program interns. The contacts at the Campus School included Director Cathy Reid, Principal Timothy Lightman, and both 6th grader teachers, Tom Weiner and Lara Ramsey. Lastly, because I sought the level of involvement and participation of Hampshire College in the NCLI coalition, I contacted Earl Anderson and Karen Warren, both instructors for the Hampshire Outdoor Program. My initial plans for my project began as shown below:

1. Supporting the No Child Left Inside Act

In order to register the institution as a NCLI Coalition member, I first sought permission by submitting a petition to the college president. In the petition, I added background information on the disorder, the act, my project, and the action needed from the college. The petition was sent via e-mail in order to receive a quicker response, and I also provided the website and instructions to register the school (nclicoalition.org).

2. Formulating a curriculum

The 6th grade students at the Campus School were selected as the group for whom my project was to be applied. They were also chosen because every 6th grade class at the Campus School participates in a 5-day outdoor trip to Nature's Classroom in Connecticut. My project's events could serve as an optional supplement and continuum of the annual programming offered to the 6th graders. However, the 6th grade class is made up of 2 classes of 20 students, 40 students in total. With a kayaking lesson as my original activity and knowing the limited

capacity of the boathouse, I restricted the lesson to a maximum of 20 students.

Because an important part of the project was to get students from both 6th grade classes working together, I planned a “wilderness survival” hike along the Mill River path as an activity for the other 20 students. My goal was to create two groups of 20 students, each with approximately 10 students from each class.

Though the curriculums for each event were different in content, the goal for both was similar: to have fun outside. I used a similar syllabus to one I have previously used for summer outdoor camps. The kayaking/canoeing lesson would begin with a familiarization with the gear. Special emphasis would be placed on safety and the use of each item of clothing gear and paddle. Then, an introduction to basic paddling skills would follow. Emphasis here would be placed on having each student practice the strokes on land as if they were already in their boats. This provides a chance for instructors to see whether students are using proper technique. Familiarization with the boats would follow, including choosing paddling partners. Finally, all boats were to be put on the water and each boat would receive 15 minutes of practice. The last 10-15 minutes would be set apart for down right enjoyment and plain old fun.

The curriculum planned for the hiking event was to begin at the boathouse, and follow the path behind Paradise Pond, following the Mill River. The first section of the hike included a “get your bearings” type of introduction with the use of compasses, maps, and ultimately, the use of natural landmarks. As the hike continued, the path was to be lined with small posters marking four stations, each containing a question and illustration, and directing the lesson towards a particular

skill. Stations would include plant identification, tips on animal tracking, and worst-case scenarios type of dilemmas. The third section of the hike included a brief theatrical play acted out by the guides in which each actor would do things one is not suppose to do in the wild in regards to the Leave No Trace principles.

3. Planning the events

I contacted Scott Johnson to inquire as to whether the boathouse could be used for a kayaking event for approximately 12-15 students. Simultaneously, I sought the permission and help from the 6th grade teachers and Director at the Campus School. Each contact received background information of the project and my mission, as well as an outline and tentative plan for the two events.

To staff the events, I selected 8 Smith students to help instruct, four for each event. For the kayaking day, I contacted both Outdoor Programs interns because of their leadership experience and technical skills. I also contacted two other Smith students who had either previously participated in personal kayaking trips, trips offered by the Outdoor Club, or had taken the sea-kayaking/white-water kayaking and/or canoeing courses offered by Smith College or elsewhere. For the hiking event, I looked for students who had one or more of the following requirements: hiking/backpacking experience, skills in plant identification or animal tracking, able to use various navigational tools (compass, maps, etc.), and teaching experience. In general, experience and enthusiasm was a requirement for both.

Following the approval of the Director, the final step was to send a letter to the parents of the 6th graders. Included was the event's information, with a brief history of the project, and a liability waiver for the boathouse.

4. Conducting e-interviews

Due to unforeseen modifications to the projects, I conducted e-interviews with Scott Johnson for Smith College and Karen Warren at Hampshire College, both outdoor educators. I questioned both of them on the situation of our community in regards to environmental education and the disorder, as well as how they became involved with outdoor education, and how they believed the colleges were contributing to environmental education. Specifically, I wanted to know the process that Hampshire College took in order to become a member of the NCLI, and what its program was doing as a commitment to the Coalition.

Results

Although the list of NLCI Coalition members was mostly made up of organizations and state programs, support from academic institutions mainly came from elementary and middle schools. Hampshire College was only listed under their Outdoor Programs. In the reply to my petition, President Carol Christ mentioned that the college is bound to a strict policy on legislative and lobbying action. Because the Coalition is a lobbying group for issues not directly tied to us, the college could not register as members of the coalition. According to the president, “[Smith College can] approach our legislators only on issues directly relevant to higher education,

like increasing Pell grants,” (personal communication, April 3, 2009). When I asked Karen Warren about the steps Hampshire took towards becoming a registered member and the challenges they faced, she made it known that she was the main person spearheading action at Hampshire in regards to the NCLI. As an integral member of Hampshire’s Outdoor Program, she was able to register with the NCLI Coalition without a problem. As an educator of experiential learning at Hampshire, she has incorporated related concepts into her curriculum and has student groups from her course work with youth in the outdoors, making them aware of the opportunities available to them.

In their respective e-interviews, both Scott and Karen mentioned that their interest in outdoor education was sparked by early exposure to the outdoors. Karen grew up in a rural area and Scott was exposed to the outdoors through his family. Both also mentioned that their interest transformed from a pastime to a career option during their college years.

In regards to the kayaking and hiking event that were to make up the field work section of the project, innumerable factors and matters out of anyone’s control inhibited the implementation of the events. Limitations in timing and communication proved to be the biggest challenges to the project. With most of the work for this project taking place in the second half of the second semester, use of the boathouse and help from the interns was limited. Smith’s Outdoor Program schedules trips throughout the year, most of which are lead or organized by the two interns. At the Campus School, roadblocks were mainly due to delays in communication and busyness of schedules. Ultimately, I was unable to distribute the

letter of permission to the parents on time. One last challenge was in the remarkable and surprising accuracy of weather reports. Because the kayaking event was planned for the 11th of April, so were the April showers. The hiking event was cancelled and the kayaking event postponed to the 23rd of May. This time, the kayaking event was to be limited to only one class, and outcomes from the event would serve as a small-scale model for future plans. Unfortunately, the kayaking event was cancelled all together.

Discussion

Smith College has a consortium of not only bright and committed students and staff, but within the student body, one can find a diversity of skills and experiences waiting to be put to good use. With the current economic difficulties hitting our college, it is time for us students to play to ours strengths and create our own opportunities while making them available to others willing to learn. The outdoor field is one of many areas that can provide such opportunities for leadership and learning. In 2006, another student taking this seminar directed her project towards increasing leadership opportunities through college's Outdoor Programs (Constantine, 2006). Fruitfully, the Program has evolved into one that allows for interested, busy, and stressed college students to engage in outdoor activities from white water kayaking to backpacking to cross-country skiing. According to Scott Johnson, the Outdoor Program is still in a stage of infancy in regards to programming and structure (personal communication, April 30, 2009). However, I did not have to go far to find students that had the enthusiasm, skills, and

experience needed for to assist in the two planned events. This suggests that there is no lack of willingness or knowledge amongst the student body, simply that perhaps there are not enough opportunities made available in which different skills could be put to use. As the leaders of tomorrow, we cannot expect the college to hand us these opportunities, but we must use our resources in the college and create our own chances.

In the Johnson and Warren interviews, both educators mentioned that their interest in making the outdoor field a possible career choice came to them during their college years (S. Johnson, personal communications, April 30, 2009; K. Warren, personal communication, May 1, 2009). As an individual interested in the environmental science field, Johnson noted that his optimism for political progress in the environment ran low (as is common in students seeking to find solutions for the plethora of environmental issues). Instead, he saw outdoor adventure as a means for which to expose society to the issues that often overwhelm even the most passionate of environmentalists, "...by taking people out into the beautiful places in the world, it would give them a tangible reason to fight for environmental causes," (personal communication, April 30, 2009). Both the importance of early exposure to nature and the value of an academic institution of higher education gifted with the resources and skills, were evident in the only two interviews I conducted. I predict that had I managed to interview more individuals, my results would have been similar to those found in the 10-year study achieved by Louv.

Furthermore, Johnson made it aware that plans to create more leadership opportunities through the Outdoor Program internships are in the works. As a

method of carrying out the mission of the NCLI, adding the same type of event that I planned for this project to the responsibilities of the internship positions could be one way in which the mission of the NCLI could be carried out. Perhaps another idea would be to create an interterm course, like the one already available by the Outdoor Program on animal tracking, based solely on the organization of events like these. Scheduling of the events, however, would need to be done at the very beginning of the academic year in order to reserve needed facilities. The actual organizing could happen during the interterm timeframe and further student recruitment could be carried out throughout the semester. I ran both ideas by Johnson, who showed support and mentioned that such events could possibly be added to an internship position, but since the Outdoor Program is going through changes, definite answers were unavailable. One day, perhaps.

While the events for my project were specific, students wanting to carry this project on independently (without the direct help of the Outdoor Program) could change the actual content and intended audience as they saw fit. For example, the events do not necessarily need to be hosted for the Campus School, but can be extended to other private or public schools in the region. The important part to take into consideration when planning these events is to play to the strengths of the organizers. An efficient lesson is taught by a confident and knowledgeable person. If my passion and expertise were in kayaking but I chose to teach rock climbing, my lesson would perhaps falter in quality. The focus of the event should not be on an activity you have desired to pursue, but on an activity that you could execute

properly and one that the participants could enjoy. After all, the goal of these events is not focused so much on perfecting a skill but on the enjoyment of being outside.

While the college may not be able to show its political support for the NCLI, its students can take on the initiative to educate others on campus or those in our community. Helping to reduce and eliminate the nature-deficit disorder can come in a variety of forms, from on-going programs, to one-day events, to a 15-minute recess break. In this period of economic turmoil, we cannot always rely on acquiring the grants or funding from the government or institutions needed to jump start outdoor environmental education events. Instead, we can do it with the combined efforts of students, the support of faculty and staff, and the connections of a prestigious college.

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