

LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS

If you stroll around your neighborhood and can remember what it was like thirty or forty years ago, you'll miss the kids. They're not out shouting and screaming in the spray from a fire hydrant on a hot day, or sliding down snowy hills on cardboard "sleds" in winter; they're not building a tree fort or improvising a dam on the local creek, or creating a menagerie of insects and amphibians.

That worries Richard Louv, and in *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (334pp., Algonquin books, 2005) he tells us why he thinks we should be worried too.

We know where the kids are, of course – absorbed in a computer game, or texting, playing a carefully supervised sport, maybe even learning about nature in a classroom power point presentation.

What's missing is unstructured play – which adults fear for their kids' safety, and because they might get sued. And, with less leisure than ever before, because they fear wasting precious time.

In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner declared the American frontier closed – western expansion was complete.

In 1993 the U.S. Census Bureau stopped including farm families – statistically negligible because they'd shrunk to less than 2% of the population. Another frontier closed.

Now we approach a third closure, characterized by an ignorance of food's origins; a blurring of machines, humans and animals; a deepened and almost solely intellectual knowledge of animals; an invasion of our cities by wildlife; and new cities, surrounded by housing tracts

and malls instead of sustaining farms. By all appearances, food comes from trucks, trains or cargo jets.

Louv lists the symptoms of “nature deficit disorder” as diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher than normal rates of physical and mental illness. More and more kids are taking anti-depressants and anti-psychotic drugs. 40% of 5-8 year olds suffer cardiac risk factors such as obesity. Almost 8 million suffer mental problems like ADHD.

If a kid is truly engaged with nature – not seeing it as a backdrop for a cell phone or roaring over it in an ATV – it can demand full use of the senses, and provide a place apart from adults. It can be calming, healing, stress-reducing.

Yet countless communities have virtually outlawed unstructured outdoor nature play; instead we have organized sports on manicured playing fields.

And we don’t go or even look outside as much, thanks to air conditioning, gadgets which distract kids from looking out of car windows, fear of traffic, strangers, Halloween, dark woods. We see nature as a commodity, an experiment, a sales pitch.

Even young scientists too often learn theoretical, mathematical and computer models of nature, not what’s actually out there.

So how do we invite kids outside? Louv proposes gardening, fishing and hunting (they’re messy, but so is nature), wildcrafting, gleaning, birding, journaling, creating ponds, restoring trails and streams. He suggests “adventure playgrounds” – well established in Europe – for building forts, mudslides – getting dirty in the wild.

To keep them safe, we should allow freedom, but keep them in sight. Get all kids over 10 a cell phone. Get to know neighbors. Encourage play with other kids.

Instead of cancelling recess, we need to help schools green their grounds, manage the areas around them (and our cities) as if they were wildlife preserves.

Every college graduate, Louv says, should know the laws of thermodynamics, basic principles of ecology, carrying capacity, end-use/least cost analysis, how to live well in a place, limits of technology, appropriate scale, sustainable agriculture and forestry, steady-state economics, environmental ethics – and the joy and wonder of nature up close.

A tall order, for sure. Yet if our children don't connect with nature, who will defend the environment when we're gone?