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# Last Child in the Woods

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**Richard Louv**, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin, 2008).

Sometime in the last few decades, a third American frontier quietly opened, or so says Richard Louv in this recent thought-provoking book. A little more than a century ago historian Frederick Jackson Turner brought to attention the closing of the first frontier; namely, the free access to wilderness area that allowed and encouraged westward expansion. This point was marked by the census of 1890, which noted the absence of a continuous line of frontier land. A century later, another census marked the end of a second frontier, as the farm population had been whittled down to such a number that the long-standing annual farm survey was dropped. The third and current American frontier, suggests Louv, is characterized by a severance of the public and private mind from the natural world and the values which adhere to a nature-attached culture.

Resulting from this is a malady that Louv terms “nature-deficit disorder,” which he insists does not have a strictly medical or scientific meaning, but is simply a way to give a name to a phenomenon that is becoming widely recognized. But this is not the only new term readers will notice. Louv’s book is scattered with newly coined terms relating to the alleged divorce from nature, its causes, consequences, and remedies. Ecophobia, biophilia, eighth intelligence, ecopsychology, zoopolis – Louv seems to think and speak in a language foreign to common parlance. And that is partly the point: much of the problem, according to Louv, is that the big systems which run our culture (education, government, city and urban planning, media and marketing) have long been pushing us toward all that is man-made and technologically up-to-date, and away from any real connection to land, nature, food – in essence to all of creation. (Creation, however, is a term that the author is careful not to use.) Even the environmentalists, he wryly notes, no longer come from the forest with dirt on their boots; they wear the suited uniform of Washington lobbyists.

Louv focuses on children in his study, partly because he sees obvious consequences for them in a distancing from nature, and partly because of the joy and nostalgia that so many older adults have for their own outdoor child experiences, which are increasingly more foreign to the average American kid. There is more than a little irony in this, since the environmental movement has been so successful in introducing environmental awareness programs into the public school curriculum. Surprisingly, Louv argues that this only worsens the problem, creating “ecophobia,” where children know nothing of their own rivers and forests first-hand, but only the images and apocalyptic stories of rainforest depletion. The result, he says, is an antipathy for nature, based on fears inspired at an early age.

The negative consequences of nature-deficit disorder, as seen by Louv, have varying levels of empirical data behind them, yet many seem sufficiently supported by common sense. Among them: childhood

obesity, poor academic performance, declining emotional well-being, low sense of safety and connectedness, increasing incidence of ADHD diagnoses. The last in that list is in some ways the most alarming, as it is rapidly becoming the number one reason for pediatric medication, and in Louv's presentation certainly there is scientific data to support his connection. The causes for the severance of our culture – and especially our children – from nature are likewise manifold. Louv cites the following among them: lack of time (a necessity for experiencing nature) due to over scheduling and overuse of television, parental fear (of traffic, crime, stranger-danger, liability, and the risks of nature itself), efficiency-based urban and suburban planning (which excludes open and unstructured play spaces), and education programs at all levels (which emphasize technology and specified study over more classical and hands-on natural history studies).

Much of Louv's book is understandably dedicated to stating the problem and drawing the reader to share his concerns, and the picture he paints is of a situation for children that is concerning at the least and disastrous at the worst. Still, in his first writing and especially in his recent revision, he sees reasons to be encouraged – many of them inspired by the first printing of this book. What is to be done for the children? Louv gives a variety of guidance. For parents: learn to re-experience – or experience for the first time – the joy and wonder of the natural world, which necessarily takes time. Read good literature with your children – he mentions Tolkien – which awakens and nurtures a love for nature and can partly fulfill the need for it. Nurture “constructive boredom,” which can lead to and be resolved through free outdoor play. For educators, he adamantly promotes a return to less efficient but more effective nature studies, which provides in-depth knowledge of local flora and fauna, and builds a sense of connectedness that has been lost. Allow for studies to occur out-of-doors when the area of study suggests it. And for civic leaders, he makes a plea for “green” design, which utilizes and preserves natural spaces when planning communities, work and school spaces, and especially child play areas.

What can we hope to acquire, or regain, from following Louv's admonitions and suggestions? The conclusion here is just as much a blend of data and common sense: improved physical and emotional health, greater inspiration and appreciation for the fine arts, stronger discipline and character, improved school and work performance and satisfaction, and a greater sense of wholeness.

This last benefit – a greater sense of wholeness – Louv turns to at the end of the book, and it is here that he finally addresses the spiritual component, much too far along for this reader, but as Louv points out, religious environmentalists make strange bedfellows, so perhaps he considered it best not to muddy the waters. Still, it seemed there was perhaps too concerted and universal an effort to eliminate from the great majority of the book any use of the word creation. That, while making room repeatedly for hypothesizing that our unavoidable need for nature-connectedness is based in our physical/psychological memories of our primitive evolutionary experiences.

Perhaps an older theory – that our need for nature has its origin in our Creator, in whom all of creation finds its origin and end – has a little too much data and common sense behind it; it seems something novel was in order. Yet it is a study in truth that the concerns, solutions, and conclusions are much the same.

