

ESSAY #1: Review of “Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder”

Why is Wilderness Challenge-Based Camps and School Curriculum critical for At-Risk Youth? (and not widely available for youth at risk intervention at schools and municipalities)

In Canada, the judicial system is set up to deal with young offenders, with optional sentencing to wilderness and nature-based therapy camps and boot camps eg. Project DARE and Project CANOE, Craigwood Youth Services etc., instead of incarceration. This is typical of our North American culture when dealing with youth.....when broken, apply therapy or try to fix the problem.

Unfortunately, there is very little in the way of youth at risk intervention camps or programs, or concerted efforts in our municipalities/cities to try to effectively deal with intervention or prevention. Coupled with overly structured lifestyles and the virtual-tour high-tech computer age, youth of today are more confused and bored than ever.

Over the past 30 years, my wilderness training company “WSC Survival School Inc.” has been involved in designing and leading teen wilderness survival camps. Although not involved in any research regarding youth at risk and nature therapy, I observed considerable change and impact in some of these teens during these 30 years, and as a result, came up with our motto:

“we take teens into the wilderness to teach them how to survive, so they might learn how to survive our wild civilized world”

Richard Louv’s ground- breaking revolutionary “Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder” outlines a new way of thinking when it comes to today’s youth, and potential new frontier that is imminent. For years, I found it easy to give qualitative analysis of the benefits of wilderness adventure therapy to teens, but now have quantitative proof as a

result of Richard Louv's research. Mr. Louv has quantified nature-based therapy and the need for child-development nature experiences to a level previously unheard of. In fact, his ideas are so astounding, that many of the recreation leaders and leaders that I have polled note that they have studied the text, or heard about it from colleagues.

The critical points that should be reviewed from Richard Louv's text are as follows:

- ~the absolute need for nature-based curriculum in schools, camps, and at home
- ~examples of government nature-based program cuts, and nature centre closures eg. Frost Centre, Bark Lake
- ~the link between A.D.D./A.D.H.D. and other childhood disorders to nature deficit disorder
- ~the link between nature education and increased scores in basic classes eg. English, mathematics
- ~the concepts of "too much structured child activities", and freetime in nature to be creative and risk-taking
- ~the connection between increased depression and computers/internet
- ~the notion of a "new emerging frontier" that includes increased nature experiences and the development of "zoo-opolis"
- ~the survival of our planet, and the connection of nature education

My recent experiences with government and school agencies regarding the importance of nature-based youth at-risk therapy camps and programs has been both positive and frustrating. For example, in 2004, the Ontario Provincial government announced the closure of the beloved "Leslie M. Frost Natural Resources Education Centre" (located near Dorset) due to a perceived cost savings of \$2 million annually. This centre has been in operation since the 1950's, whereby thousands of school groups have had their first outdoor education experience! In some cases, the experience may have been life-changing eg. Foregoing drugs, gangs, and crime for positive life experiences. It's estimated that incarceration costs per prisoner annually are approximately

\$75,000 – 100,000. The outdoor's and environmental communities were immediately outraged, and after several protests and tens of thousands of letters to the provincial ministry, the Premier (Dalton McGuinty) asked for a standing committee to be formed to address the issue of the best use for the moth-balled centre. The decision that followed was spectacular for kids. It was concluded that the centre should be leased out to a private entity to be operated again as an environmental education centre. In 2007, the Frost Institute and College opened up, and once again, thousands of kids will benefit from an experiential outdoor-based education or camp experience!

In 2006, the Bark Lake Outdoor Leadership Centre (located near Irondale) was threatened with closure, since it's owners (Columbia Private Schools) decided to develop the lakefront wilderness property into 140 cottage lots and condo facilities. Interestingly, Columbia's website boasts that "Kids come first". As an Adventure-Based Outdoor Conference Centre, the approximate sale value is near \$10 million, whereas as a developed property for 140 cottage lots, a retirement condo residence and recreation centre, the owners hoped to see sales proceeds in the \$25 – 35 million dollar range. This was prior to a world-wide press release sent out by myself after attending their hushed re-development meeting, where environmental groups have delayed the plans with the discovery of rare flora and fauna species on site, and the environmental impact of the access road becoming much more expensive. This has been aided by a crashing of the real estate market, although my understanding is that presently, Columbia Schools are still pressing forward with their original re-development plans.

According to the Canadian National Crime Prevention Centre, the annual average cost to house a incarcerated youth is \$100,000. I wonder if the folks at Columbia Private Schools, and at the McGuinty Provincial Government, are even remotely aware of these statistics.

In the 1970's and 1980's, many school boards across Canada down-sized or eliminated their outdoor ed programs and nature centres. Recently, the Ontario Ministry of Education mandated the inclusion of Outdoor Education in

secondary school curriculums. The Catholic secondary school board has implemented a “Beyond the Walls” outdoor education program at their secondary schools. Many high schools now have outdoor clubs, and entire classes or credits taught off-campus. The new “Frost Institute” has a year-round and summer program for outdoor education high school credits. Many public schools allow for outdoor education credits or components as a part of their social sciences, history and geography classes. A high percentage of private schools include “outdoor experiential education” as a part of their curriculums.

A benchmark outdoor disaster resulting in the loss of 13 lives on an ill-fated canoe trip in June 1978 on Lake Temiskaming (St. John's Private School) probably impacted decision-makers in the years ahead. Although infrequent, these mishaps reinforce the over reactions, fear and liability of outdoor education and decision-makers, as outlined frequently by Richard Louv. Insurance companies have capitalized on every bit of outdoor disasters, making it difficult for camps and outdoor adventure organizations to afford coverage, and in many cases, even obtain needed liability insurance. Interestingly, no outdoor-related claim has ever exceeded one million dollars in Canada, whereas daily automobile multi-million dollar lawsuits abound.

Richard Louv's work is now being adopted in a very big way by outdoor educators, teachers, camp leaders, learning disability associations, and youth at risk educators across North America. During nearly three decades of leading

and designing wilderness experience camps for teens, I observed dramatic changes in some of the participants. In many cases where ADD and/or ADHD had been diagnosed, and where camp staff were directed to assist the teen in administering the drug (eg. Ritalyn), I observed first hand that when involved in nature adventure activities, especially during overnight canoe-survival trips, that these high-energy active kids became quite normal and rather calm. I recall one particular kid who proclaimed to me that he didn't need to take his meds anymore. His divorced parents made it an issue to battle over, with myself in the middle. The kid's father insisted that his son needed the medications, and scolded me when I explained my findings to him (and that the mom agreed with me and the kid!) Years later, to the dad's surprise, his son became a camp leader and wilderness enthusiast.....as have numerous kids from my camps. In one other very memorable case, a bright young 14 year-old girl who had straight -A marks and was a valedictorian at her school, became suicidal unexpectedly while on her final camp outing (after 3 years of wilderness camps with me). Apparently completely oblivious to her family and friends, she had a complete breakdown as a result of her parent's chronic fighting and refusing to divorce due to the kids. I took control of the situation, notified both parents and the authorities, and saved her life! Years later, at the age of 23, having worked on her degree in social sciences, and going forward with a Master's in Social Work, she joined me as an alumni on a summer teen wilderness canoe-survival trip. During the trip, one

evening by the campfire and looking up at the stars, she confided in me that “this place by the lake was her home, and what saved her life”, and “that I was her family”. And furthermore, she was going into a career to help kids with autism and disabilities!

Another positive outcome that overcame the risk factors involves a youth named “Aric”, who attended my earliest attempts at wilderness survival camps as an 11 year old. Aric attended the camps for several years, and was eventually invited as a field-aide trip leader. In the first few years, Aric’s older brother “Amir” also attended the camp, and was also a field-aide, and then head counsellor. Aric’s older brother was always the good kid, with clear goals. He went on directly to university studies, and became a music instructor. Aric, on the other hand, joined gangs, was a frequent drug user, and was involved in criminal activity. Recently, I received an e-mail from Aric stating that he thanked me profusely for having a profound, positive effect on his life. Because I believed in him, he pursued his dreams, and was now enrolled at Lakehead University’s Outdoor Recreation 4-year degree program.

Currently as the survival trainer and consultant (and host of some of the episodes) of the YTV Survivorman-Kids series, I have witnessed some of the

magic that wilderness experiences have on kids. It is my hope that this new series will inspire more educators and leaders to incorporate wilderness education in their programming as a result, and that millions of kids will be motivated to walk in the footsteps of the 8 castaways in the show. Based on the feedback I have