

# Nature-Deficit Disorder?

*Richard Louv Asks Whether We're Raising Our Children Under House Arrest*

ARNIE COOPER

**In** the days before sprawling residential subdivisions, children at play could often be seen traipsing through meadows or climbing trees. Now it's more common to find boys and girls being shuttled from school to computer to soccer practice as part of a fast-paced schedule that leaves little time for daydreaming or exploring nature. The result, says journalist Richard Louv, is "nature-deficit disorder." Louv coined this term, which is not a medical diagnosis, to call attention to the absence of nature in children's lives. In his newest book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books), he ties the lack of time spent in nature to everything from childhood obesity to psychological disorders.

Suburban sprawl and busy schedules are just two factors keeping children out of nature, Louv says. Others include the strict focus on academics, what he calls the "criminalization of play," media-fueled fear of child abductions, and overzealous environmental campaigns. Still, Louv is optimistic and believes that people with different political and cultural concerns can find common ground around this issue. Most people above a certain age, he says, remember having a place in nature that was special to them when they were a child.

For Louv, that place was the woods beyond his childhood home in Raytown, Missouri. Born in 1949, Louv was raised by an artist mother and a chemical-engineer father, both of whom

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encouraged his engagement with the natural world. But nature for the Louvs didn't mean just looking at wildflowers. Every spring, his family would get in the car on a mission to save the box turtles — who were making their annual migration — from the ravages of automobiles.

Louv began writing at a young age, and by twelve he was getting published in his school and community newspapers. He went on to receive a degree in journalism from the University of Kansas in 1971. It was the Vietnam era, and he successfully applied for conscientious-objector status. For his alternative service, Louv got a position at Project Concern, a charity in San Diego. He spent five years there before returning to journalism and later became a contributing editor to *Human Behavior* and *San Diego magazine*, and then a columnist for twenty-three years at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. Louv has also written for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. He helped found *Connect for Kids*, the largest child-advocacy site on the Web, and was an advisor to the Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World awards program. In 2005 he cofounded the *Children and Nature Network* ([www.cnaturenet.org](http://www.cnaturenet.org)). His other books include *The Web of Life: Weaving the Values That Sustain Us* (Conari Press) and *Fly-Fishing for Sharks: An Angler's Journey across America* (Simon & Schuster).

We spoke in the sunroom of Louv's San Diego home, on an uncharacteristically rainy August day. A shadow box of multi-colored fishing lures hung on the wall, and titles like *The Art of Fly Tying* and *Trout Magic* lined the shelf. (He prefers fishing to writing, he says.) Louv has two sons — Jason, twenty-five, and Matthew, nineteen — and is as comfortable quoting facts and figures as he is talking about the delights of a childhood immersed in nature.

**Cooper:** What was your relationship with nature as a child?

**Louv:** When I was a kid in the 1950s, I had a strong sense that nature was saving me in some fundamental way, though I couldn't have articulated it then. I found a meaning in the outdoors that I didn't find anywhere else. Not that my life outside nature was without meaning; it's just there was a certain intensity in nature. I'd go as far as to call it a "spiritual" intensity, though the word *spiritual* makes some people — including me — uncomfortable.

I was lucky to have parents who introduced me to nature. Being outdoors gave me a sense of balance and a little bit of escape from family problems.

**Cooper:** How has childhood changed since you were growing up?

**Louv:** Children's activities seem more restricted now. My son Matthew once asked me, "How come it was more fun when you were a kid?"

Matthew's now nineteen, and he and I recently traveled



RICHARD LOUV

to Kansas and Missouri. I took him to some of the places where I'd spent time in nature as a child. We went to the Lake of the Ozarks, where I'd gone fishing. Back then there were only rustic cabins and wooden boats hauled up on the mud beach. Now it's cheek-by-jowl California-style McMansions and Miami-style condos along the shore, and if you went out on a bass boat in the middle of the day, you'd be in danger of being capsized by the speedboats' wakes. [Laughter.] There are parts of the lake that are blocked off and protected, but overall there has been a huge change.

Next we drove up to Kansas City, where I grew up. Along the way we must've seen thirty dead armadillos on the road. I had never seen even one as a child. It turns out the armadillos'

range has expanded out of Texas and up to central Missouri. There's some suspicion that this might be caused by global warming, but that also may not be the case. In fact, armadillos have been heading north ever since they crossed the Rio Grande from Mexico in 1850. We have to consider a much longer clock when we talk about the environment and remember that major environmental changes have always occurred.

Growing up in the Midwest, I learned that nature is often dangerous. In 1957 I watched as a huge tornado passed behind our house and killed nearly fifty people. Kids today, because they don't have a lot of direct contact with nature, have this odd belief that nature should be safe and dependable. So when some major natural disaster, like Hurricane Katrina, happens, they take it as evidence of the end of the world.

I think the long-term effect of Katrina will rank with that of the 9/11 attacks. It taught young people that nature can be dangerous. Many kids my son's age think of nature as a slogan on a T-shirt, a consumer item that doesn't have much power. When disaster strikes, nature goes from being something they wear to being something they fear, from clothing to catastrophe. The joy that can be found in the middle, somewhere between consumerism and natural disaster, gets lost when a generation has so little direct engagement with nature.

When I showed Matthew the places where I'd lived, we took a walk through what was left of the woods behind one house. What for me had been a source of endless wonder was now a sad remnant of its former self. When I was a boy, that house, though part of a ticky-tacky, Levittown-like neighborhood, was on the very edge of Kansas City. I could walk through the yard, past a hedge, and into a cornfield, where I built my underground fort. Beyond that were deep woods and rolling hills and farms that seemed to go on forever. I spent many of my waking hours hiking those woods and fields with my dog, a collie named Banner. It was a real fifties boyhood.

But my knowledge and awareness of nature stopped with those woods. I could not have told you anything about the Amazon rain forest. I had no clue that my woods were connected ecologically to any other woods. For kids today, it's the reverse: they can tell you plenty about the Amazon, but they

cannot tell you the last time they went outside just to watch leaves blowing in the breeze. It's good that children know more about ecology, but an intellectualized experience of nature simply isn't enough. We need both.

**Cooper:** You were aware of threats to nature, though, when you were a boy?

**Louv:** Yes, I had a deep sense of ownership of those woods behind my house. They were *my* woods. My sense of ownership was so strong that as an eight-year-old I pulled up hundreds of survey stakes, because I knew they had something to do with the bulldozers that were taking out other woods nearby. I had a big stack of the stakes behind the hedge. I've learned since that my sabotage would've been more effective if I'd simply moved the stakes around.

When I tell that story in speeches around the country, I ask the audience members how many of them have pulled out survey stakes, and about a third of them will raise their hand, mostly those thirty-five and older. Then I induct them into the Secret Society of Stake Pullers. They become "stakeholders" in that organization. [Laughter.]

I was in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a few months ago, speaking to the Quivira Coalition, a group that unites ranchers and environmentalists in support of common causes. Around half of the five hundred people in attendance were wearing cowboy hats. I told the story about the stakes, and afterward, during the Q and A, a rancher stood up. He was the real deal — big white handlebar mustache, sunburned face, in his sixties — and he said that when he was a boy, he'd pulled out survey stakes. And then he began to cry in front of all these people. He was embarrassed, but he continued to talk about his deep sense of grief that his generation might be the last to have an intimate connection to the land.

**Cooper:** In your book you write about a kid who visited Utah's Rainbow Bridge rock formation and was disappointed because it wasn't as "perfect" as it looked in the brochure.

**Louv:** The experience of nature through media is primarily visual. Young people today tend to lack the deeper personal experience of nature that involves all of the senses. So when they see a natural wonder like the Rainbow Bridge or the Grand Canyon, they react to it almost entirely visually at first, comparing the image to other images they've seen, which are often enhanced or dramatized. But if they stick around long enough, their other senses kick in, and the place becomes more than just an image to them.

**Cooper:** Why don't more young people have a firsthand experience of nature? Aren't there still large swaths of undeveloped land?

**Louv:** Yes, but more people have moved to cities and suburbs. In the Great Plains states, for example, there has been a huge population drop. With the growth of new communication technologies, however, people can be connected wherever they live, and I imagine a resulting revival of the old small towns that have disappeared on the Plains. Sooner or later the population will bounce back, and people will return to rural areas

— which is good news for children, because they'll have access to nature. New towns could be designed using ecologically friendly architecture and sustainable urban design.

**Cooper:** Do you really think people will move back to Kansas?

**Louv:** There are already signs of migration out of the cities. San Diego, where I live, is losing population for the first time. It's a slight decline, but significant when you consider the number of immigrants coming in. Rising housing prices are causing people to look more toward Middle America and away from the coasts. So this shift will happen because of economics, but also because of a desire for a better quality of life.

The availability of nature isn't enough, though. When we were in Kansas City, my son was astounded by how much open farmland and forest there was just outside the city. Yet during the entire four days, we did not see one single kid playing outside. It may have been because of the heat. But then, when I was a kid, I played outside even in very hot weather.

I spoke recently in Ukiah, California, the town that was at the center of the controversial efforts to protect the endangered spotted owl. I learned that kids aren't going outside there either, despite the rural setting. It's not just the spotted owl that's endangered in nature; it's the human child. And if children aren't going outside today, who is going to care about the spotted owl fifteen years from now?

Childhood obesity in rural areas is growing at twice the rate that it is in urban areas. The assumption is that these kids are watching more TV, playing more video games, and going

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on longer rides in the car. They're also not working in the fields the way previous generations did.

Ironically, some of the older cities offer people more access to nature. For example, in Philadelphia there are parks everywhere. And of course there's Central Park in New York City. Just imagine a city deciding to build a park that size today. You can see a bit of green in suburban areas, but it's manicured to the point that it might as well be cement, and there are rules that criminalize natural play. That's another reason kids aren't going outside.

It's not just suburban development that's at fault. In many school districts, teachers can no longer have reptiles and amphibians in the classroom because of concerns about salmonella. (Teaching students to wash their hands might be a better idea.) And People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals just came out with an anti-fishing comic book for kids, done in the style of *Tales from the Crypt*. On the cover a father with a huge knife is ripping the guts out of a fish in front of his horrified children. Fishing isn't the only way for kids to be engaged with nature,

but it's one traditional way. I think it's destructive in the long run to frighten kids away from fishing.

I understand the desire to avoid harming any type of wildlife. My wife carries spiders out of the house, and sometimes I help her. But the morality of our interaction with nature is often quite murky. It's important for kids to be engaged in nature so they can confront these gray areas and make decisions, with our help, about what is moral and what is not.

**Cooper:** Aren't safety concerns another reason kids aren't going outside?

**Louv:** In every part of the country, the fear of child abduction has reached epidemic proportions. It's changing the way we live. I won't pretend I was immune to it as a father; my kids did not have the kind of free-range childhood that I did. But there was a big canyon behind our property, and I spent a lot of time hiking in it with them. Parents need to be more active about getting kids outdoors. I'm not saying I don't have fears too, even though, as a journalist, I know the statistics: Child abductions have not increased in the past two decades, and may actually have decreased. Studies suggest that kids are safer outdoors than we believe, and that the more TV we watch, the more dangerous we think our neighborhoods are. That's not to say that there aren't bad people out there, but we can't allow fear to drive us indoors. We are raising a generation of children under virtual house arrest.

Our culture needs to begin talking about comparative risk. Yes, there are dangers in nature. Yes, there's Lyme disease. Yes, there are snakes. I used to catch copperheads when I was

a kid. A friend from high school told me recently that he remembers me running up a hill waving a small copperhead, my elbows and knees all bloody; he also remembers that I looked tremendously happy. [Laughter.] Kids, don't try this at home — seriously. But we take bigger risks when we raise kids indoors: psychological risks; risks to their sense of independence and mastery in the world; risks to their sense of place; risks to their physical health. Childhood obesity greatly increases the risk of diabetes. There is concern in the medical community that kids today may be the first generation since World War II to die younger than their parents, primarily because of this increased risk.

But nature is almost never mentioned in the national debate about childhood obesity. Instead it's suggested that you get your kids into organized sports. Think about it: the rise in childhood obesity has occurred despite two decades of growing participation in organized sports. Something's missing. Organized sports certainly give kids exercise, but there is something special about being in nature that we don't fully understand.

Pediatricians will tell you that they don't see many broken bones these days. When I was a kid, a broken bone was a rite of passage. What they do see is an increase in repetitive-stress injuries from video games and computer keyboards. The typical broken bone heals fairly quickly. Repetitive-stress injuries can last decades, even a lifetime.

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JAMES CARROLL