

Not So Much of a Good Thing

By Doug Walker
January 12, 2010

Introduction:

In 2005, Richard Louv published a book titled, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Louv's thesis is that American children are increasingly disconnected from nature and there are many negative consequences of this which he labels "Nature-Deficit Disorder." My intention in this paper is to present some of the evidence and counter-evidence for what has been called a "fundamental and pervasive shift away from nature-based recreation." [1] I'll also look at some of the causes and effects of this trend. Finally, I will look at some of the remedies and obstacles that may alter or sustain this "outdoors-disconnect" trajectory. I titled this talk "Not So Much of a Good Thing" under the assumption that the "outdoors" is a good thing, but we are far from getting "too much of it."

Outdoor recreation has a complex historical record. It is presumed that for two million years, human societies employed hunter-gatherer techniques as a subsistence strategy. They lived in the outdoors and it was survival work, not recreation, except to the extent that children engaged in play, which might be considered recreation. Roughly 10,000 years ago, early agricultural society began. And, within these societies, the elites (or nobles) engaged in outdoor recreation and sports, including hunting for pleasure and sports such as the Greek Olympic Games. Modern era outdoor recreation can be dated from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in England. Industry gave the middle class wealth and leisure time, and as a reaction to the gritty urban life of Industrial England, the middle class sought solace in nature and the outdoors. In America, this early reaction can be seen with Emerson and Thoreau. At the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century, John Muir articulated a philosophy of natural recreation that would give humans peace and vitality against the ills of the modern world.

Here are a few quotes from Muir:

"Keep close to Nature's heart... and break clear away, once in awhile, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean."

"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul."

"Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity;"

Out of the spirit of Muir came concepts like “Wilderness” and the protection of our natural places. But today, we live in a post-industrial age and the value that Muir and others found in nature has not proven its present value. The question is whether the people of the 21st century will assign anew high priority to outdoor recreation.

The Declining Trend in Outdoor Recreation:

Most people who have lived in post-WWII America are used to a monotonic trend of ever increasing crowdedness. Traffic is much worse and many of our destinations seem increasingly overrun. As with most trends, we create in our own minds an expectation that the trend will continue without reversal. Part of our recent financial problems was predicated on the expectation that housing prices would continue to rise. The 2000 bubble was based on an expectation that internet usage would increase exponentially. We were surprised to see crime rates reverse in 1995 [2]. Thus, many of us may be surprised to see a decline in the recreation usage of our public lands.

On February 4, 2008, Pergams and Zaradic published a paper in the Proceeding of the National Academy of Sciences titled, “Evidence for a fundamental and pervasive shift away from nature-based recreation.” [1] In this paper, the authors presented a compelling argument that per-capita outdoor recreation has been declining in this country since the mid 1980s. They tracked 16 indicators such as visits to National Parks and Forests, visits to State Parks, Census Bureau tabulations on backpacking, fishing and hunting licenses, and use of the Appalachian Trail. They also did some work internationally, using Spain and Japan. Of their indicators, most peaked between 1981 and 1991 and since then, they show annual declines of 1.2% and cumulative declines of 18-25%. Finally, they show a strong cross correlation with all of their indicators which makes their case even more compelling.

In addition to the paper by Pergams and Zaradic, countless other articles have appeared which corroborate their results. On November 28, 2008, the US Forest Service published a note stating that their “National Visitor Use Monitoring Surveys” (NVUM surveys) indicate a 13% drop in Forest visitors from 2004-2007 with Washington and Oregon experiencing a 27% drop in the same period [3].

Below is a sample indicator which is pretty easy to understand. This is the trend in overnight tent stays in National Parks [4]:

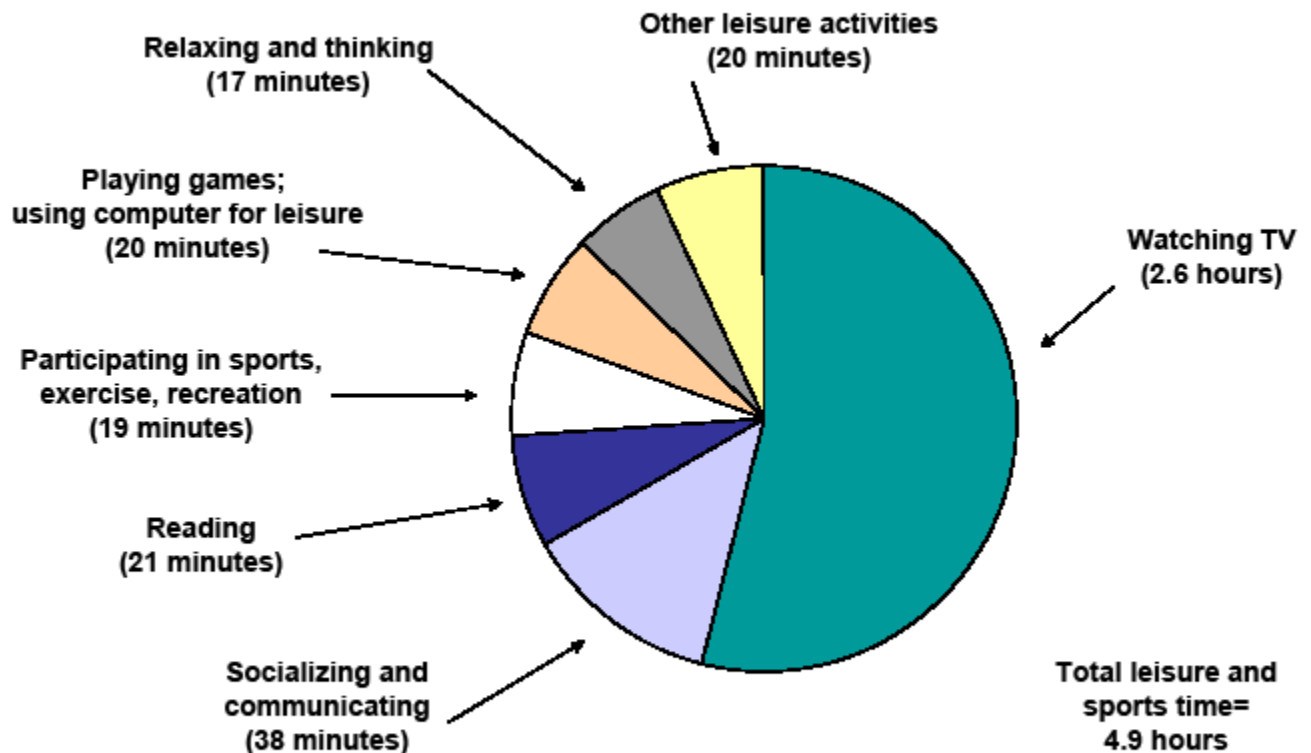
NPS Camping Report

Year	Tent Campers
1991	4,204,744
1992	4,382,824
1993	4,102,758
1994	4,240,237
1995	3,866,306
1996	3,680,310
1997	3,589,246
1998	3,457,825
1999	3,544,605
2000	3,395,816
2001	3,326,852
2002	3,357,513
2003	3,302,637
2004	3,128,014
2005	2,974,269
2006	2,882,297
2007	3,003,270
2008	2,956,761

There are many other trends in the country which tend to corroborate the decline in outdoor recreation. Most of you are familiar with the weight gain trends that have occurred in the USA and other countries, and this trend has a correlation with our more sedentary lifestyles [18]. In particular, it is reported that “older children who spend more time outside tend to be more physically active and are less likely to be overweight. “ [12]

The Bureau of Labor Statistics does a very comprehensive report on how the “average” American spends “leisure” time [5]:

Leisure time on an average day



NOTE: Data include all persons age 15 and over. Data include all days of the week and are annual averages for 2007.

SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics

What you will notice in this chart is that the average American has only 19 minutes per day for sports, exercise, and physical recreation. Other charts indicate that this time segment has declined in recent years. Dr. Nader et al. document in the Journal of the American Medical Association that by puberty, children’s physical activity level drops to 49 minutes on weekdays and 30 minutes on weekends [31] [32]. Finally, Sandra Hofferth of the University of Maryland has documented that from “1997-2003, there was a decline of 50%, from 16 to 8%, in the proportion of children 9 to 12 who spent time in such outside activities as hiking, walking, fishing, beach play and gardening.” Her studies employed impressive methodology. [10] [11]

Even if you have missed the declining trend in outdoor recreation, it has been noticed by the outdoor industry. The skiing industry has seen flat to declining

participation for a number of years, which implies a sharp per capita decrease. In response to the decline, the fishing industry has launched ads which use the byline, “take your kids fishing,” and they even have an organization called “takemefishing.org.” The Outdoor Retailers Show (OR) has been discussing the downward outdoor recreation trend for a number of years. REI operates its “Outdoor School,” not as a profit center, but in order to encourage outdoor recreation. Finally, the traditional “summer camp” experience is in steep decline, since most traditional summer camps have declining enrollments. [15] [17]

Demographic trends may also contribute to declines in outdoor recreation. Use of public lands for recreation is weighted towards older Caucasians. National Forest usage is around 96% Caucasian [6] [34] and National Parks show similar distribution, even though the country is less than 60% Caucasian. Although African-Americans are 12% of the US population, they account for only 1% of the car visitors to Yosemite [7] and 0.7% of the National Forest visitors [34]. Usage is also tipped towards greater age. The age trend is most evident in the traditional organizations that do outdoor activities such as the Sierra Club, the Mountaineers, the Mazamas, the Colorado Mountain Club, and the Backcountry Horsemen of America. All organizations have an increasing average membership age. The fact that demographic trends are towards a minority Caucasian population and that youth are less connected will likely add to the trend of decreasing outdoor recreation.

There is one additional fact which bodes poorly for outdoor recreation and that is the downward trend for the premier outdoor training organizations, specifically Outward Bound and National Outdoor Leadership School (better known as NOLS). After years of significant declining attendance, Outward Bound laid off 50% of their employees in 2008 and in 2009 has sold off more than 50% of their facilities. NOLS, which has always been smaller than Outward Bound, has fared better, but it has also seen declines throughout this decade. NOLS and Outward Bound graduates are some of the biggest sources of trained outdoor instructors for schools and a variety of outdoor programs. Their difficulties may be the proverbial “canary in the coal mine” for outdoor recreation.

The conclusion of all these studies, articles, and other evidence is that Pergams and Zaradic are correct – there does appear to be a “fundamental and pervasive shift away from nature-based recreation.” [1]

Counter Trends in Outdoor Recreation:

Not every study shows a decline in outdoor recreation. Cordell, a US Forest Service Researcher based in Georgia, reports that outdoor recreation is increasing – in many cases rapidly. His research is based on a national survey – the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE) [8]. This is a telephone survey conducted by students at the University of Tennessee which in 1999-2001 made 50,000 calls and had 22,000 usable responses. In 2008, Cordell states, “Total number of Americans participating in any of the 42 nature activities the NSRE tracks is up more than 3% since 2000, and number of activity days is up almost 32% since 2000.” Cordell also reports that “primitive camping participants grew from 28 million in 1995 to 34 million in 2000, an increase of 21%.” He also reports (2005-2008 survey) that 1/3 of all Americans visited a Wilderness or Roadless Area in 2008. Finally, in response to the statistics on declining fishing and hunting licenses, Cordell states: “license sales are greatly influenced by the spread of private residences into rural areas with large areas of natural land where owners don’t need hunting or fishing licenses for their own land.”

The US Fish and Wildlife Service did a 2006 study on trends related to wildlife-based recreation [9]. Their survey found that participants increased 6% from 2001-2006. They noted that “sportspeople” (fishing and hunting) dropped significantly in the period 2001-2006 but that wildlife viewing increased significantly offsetting the loss of sportspeople. Wildlife viewing occurs primarily around people’s homes (80%) and includes activities such as closely observing or trying to identify birds or other wildlife, photographing wildlife, feeding birds or other wildlife, or maintaining plantings where benefit to wildlife is the primary concern.

From 2006-2008, the Outdoor Foundation conducted three online surveys (41,500 participants) on outdoor recreation. The 2007 survey showed drastic drops from 2006 to 2007, but in 2008 there was in some cases significant recovery, but not enough to keep the three-year youth trend from being solidly negative. The percentage change figures for this survey seem very large, much like the Cordell survey, but the results seem very different. In particular, Cordell says that there are 22 million Americans that backpack while the Outdoor Foundation says that the number is 7 million. Also, the OF survey indicates that over three years, almost all categories of youth outdoor participation declined: “In 2008, participation in outdoor recreation among youth ages 6 to 17 dropped by 6 percent — resulting in a combined 16.7 percent drop over the last three years.” [25] The report also indicates that “wildlife viewing” for youth dropped 29% over the last three years.

It’s hard to know what to make of these three survey-based results. Some of their numbers seem astounding (1/3 of Americans visiting a Wilderness area every year). Cordell’s survey results also contradict the Forest Services NVUM

monitoring report on visitors [3]. Wildlife viewing is a hugely popular activity, but I don't know of any solid evidence that it is increasing. In fact, many studies show that the ability to identify around-the-home plants and animals has actually declined significantly [36] [37]. Also, Audubon is experiencing declining membership. Because these results are based on self-evaluation surveys – a method known to be error prone [41] – I have tended to discount their significance. In addition, the papers based on these surveys do not appear to have undergone a thorough peer-review process.

What is causing the decline in Outdoor Recreation?

It is increasingly clear that outdoor recreation is in decline, but what is causing this? Is this a cycle or is the trend likely to reverse in the near term? Certainly these are the tough questions and ones that do not generate easy answers. Two of the most obvious guesses are probably incomplete. The use of TV and other electronic media (“Videophilia”) is certainly inversely correlated with outdoor recreation [13]. But, it is also true that outdoor recreation was still increasing in the 1950s when TV usage was so rapidly expanding. Secondly, the USA and most of the world are increasingly urban (worldwide urbanization has gone from 13% to 50% in 100 years), but outdoor recreation has also declined in rural areas too, which suggests other causes are also in play.

Many believe that a complex set of sociological changes are a major cause of the decline in outdoor recreation. We will consider each of the following issues:

- The decline in volunteer-based organizations that enable outdoor recreation
- Family structure changes and increasing complexity of life
- Demographic changes
- Access to outdoor recreation

The 2001 book, *Bowling Alone* [14], documents the decline in volunteer-based organizations and civic groups. Everything from bowling leagues, fraternal organizations, and bridge-playing clubs are moribund. In the area of outdoor recreation, the outdoor clubs like the Mountaineers, the Mazamas, the Colorado Mountain Club, and even the recreation club aspect of the Sierra Club, are all in significant decline. Furthermore, even things like church-based outdoor recreation are less than in an earlier era. The Boy Scouts of America has been a significant entrée point to the outdoors, but in recent years, they do less in the outdoors [15]. The Scouts have also struggled with “membership losses and a decline in net revenue from \$54 million in 2000 to \$28 million in 2007.” [16] The damage to volunteer-based organizations is significant because they have been one of the key enablers of outdoor recreation.

Family structure changes since 1950 are complex and a much studied subject. Two changes are of particular interest: Today there are more single-parent families and in most two-parent families, both parents work outside the home. Secondly, most families and individuals take shorter vacations (extended weekends) rather than 1-2 week vacations and individuals also work longer hours [5]. Exactly how these changes impact outdoor recreation is hard to measure scientifically, but it is believed that these changes to family structure have an impact on families’ ability to make outdoor trips. Historically, parents have been the main enabler for children getting outdoors, but when they are too busy, it doesn’t happen. Finally, many have also suggested that there has been a generational loss of outdoor recreation skills.

Children are also too busy and have greatly reduced discretionary time. Alicia Senauer summarizes some studies as follows: [40], [11], [12], [19]

“In two studies, one in 2001 and the other in 2006, Dr. Sandra Hofferth and colleagues look at changes in how American children spent their time between 1981 and 1997 and between 1997 and 2003. By collecting 24-hour time diaries from thousands of parent/child participants, they investigated time spent in 18 different activities during the school year and analyzed the impact of various demographic variables on children’s time (e.g., number of parents, employment status of parents, the number of children in the family, and the level of parental education). In their studies, Hofferth presents many interesting findings including: 1) children’s discretionary time (time not spent in school, child care, etc.) declined 12% (7.4 hours a week) from 1981 to 1997 and an additional 4% (2 hours) from 1997 to 2002/3; and 2) the way children spend their discretionary time has changed—less time is spent in unstructured activities (free play) and more time is spent in structured activities (sports and youth programs). Other changes include a doubling of computer use and substantial increase in time spent studying and reading, as well as an increase in participation and time spent in church activities and youth groups. In their analyses, they found that many of these findings are associated with demographic changes in U.S. families, such as the increase in households headed by single parents and the increase in maternal employment.”

Also, parental fear for their children has been cited as a factor which limits children’s ability to play outdoors. Louv asserts this in his book and many studies support this thesis [15]. Alicia Senauer summarizes a recent study as follows: “The most important influence on a child’s mobility was safety, with 94% of parents stating that safety was their biggest concern. Parents’ safety concerns centered around strangers, teenagers and gangs, and road traffic” [22]. A 2008 series of UK studies on play and risk found that “Children and young people have their independence constrained, by school, after school activities and a lack of freedom to play outside.” [40] [23]

Demographic changes affect outdoor recreation in both indirect and direct ways. As mentioned before, many studies indicate that changes in family demographics indirectly affect outdoor recreation. But, changing ethnic distribution has a direct effect. The US Census Bureau projects that Caucasians will be a minority by 2042. In California, this is already the case [20]. The issue is that outdoor recreation participation rates are highest for Caucasians and lowest for African-Americans with Latinos about halfway between the two. So, in order to maintain a fixed recreation rate, the participation level for non-Caucasians will have to increase.

Access to the outdoors has a direct effect on outdoor recreation. To quote Will Rogers, the President of Trust for Public Land: “At the turn of the 20th century, the majority of Americans lived in rural areas and small towns relatively close to the land. At the beginning of the 21st century, 85 percent of us were living in cities and metropolitan areas, and many of us are in desperate need of places to experience nature and refresh ourselves in the out-of-doors.” [21] There are a large number of studies about how the urban built environment affects outdoor activity and green landscape architects have many proposals as to how these environments might be improved. The general thrust is that our built environments are completely oriented towards the automobile and disfavor pedestrians and bicyclists. Many have summarized our post-WWII environment as one in which the Olmsted ideal of public natural parks within cities was lost as we moved to exurban development.

Access to Federal Public Lands has become relatively difficult for young and diverse populations, especially in light of sociological changes in the country. Federal Lands have always had multiple purposes, but in recent decades various forces have led to exclusionary policies towards the citizenry. This can be demonstrated by an examination of two Federal agencies: the National Park Service and the Forest Service.

The National Park Service was established in 1916 by the “Organic Act” which states that the “purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Stephen Mather, the first Director of the Park Service (1917-1929), established programs and policies to attract people to the National Parks and create the Park Service “brand.” Mather believed that the parks could only be sustained if people knew them and visited them, and his policies were remarkably effective. After WWII, park visitation expanded exponentially reaching an inflection point around 1980 and flattening out in 1990. The system of concessions, roads, and services catering to middle-class Americans was incredibly successful at attracting people to the parks, but the parks were “overrun” and unable to adequately service the load. Other forces, budget constraints and an environmental outlook, led to a clampdown. Park Rangers and Directors began to “view visitors as an impediment to the smooth running of the parks” [24]. Park management has always had the dual mission of providing for the “enjoyment” of the people while sustaining the resource. Initially, “enjoyment” was the emphasis, but today it seems that the preference is towards conservation: For environmental reasons the North Cascades National Park administration has steadfastly opposed adding trails in the Ross Lake National Recreation Area, even though there are funds available from Seattle City Light mitigation [38]. The result is that newer Americans, both the young and people of color, are disadvantaged by this policy shift: for example, party size limits are difficult for Latino groups which often include large extended families, and in general, park information and rules seem to culturally favor older Caucasians. In

addition, the young and people of color do not seem to have the same sense of ownership of the parks. To quote NPCA: “recent surveys show that people of color remain largely absent from the national parks as visitors, subjects of interpretation, and contractors. The National Park Service itself has yet to diversify its ranks in a manner representative of the nation's changing population.” [39]

The Forest Service manages 193 million acres, more than twice the acreage that is managed by the Park Service. Their mission is one of “multiple use,” but increasingly there is less extractive use of the forests leaving their mission to be primarily conservation and recreation. The National Forests are increasingly difficult to access because for more than 10 years, the Forest Service has virtually stopped issuing permits to organizations which have paid staff. The permit hold is primarily due to budget constraints and pressure from some conservation groups urging restrictions to access. The Service has exempted some educational and volunteer-led organization from having permits, but the pattern is one that appears discriminatory. For example, in Puget Sound, the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie Forest of 1.7 million acres lies adjacent to the I-5 corridor and more than three million people. Yet the forest has no permit holders that service middle-school or younger children. Interestingly, the Forest Service will not permit groups such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, and Seattle Parks and Recreation. But they allow, without permits, Lakeside School, Bush School, and Seattle Academy (in 2009, part of this problem received a temporary fix through the efforts of Rob Iwamoto and Mary Wagner of the USFS).

The net effect of the Federal Land policies on visitors is that organizations which serve youth, low-income, and diverse populations are generally not allowed on Federal lands. Other organizations, like REI's outdoor school which serve a broad spectrum of users, are also generally excluded from public lands.

Besides having rules which have severely limited access, all Federal lands have been severely constrained by budgets and policies which have made it difficult to maintain their infrastructure. Trails are abandoned for reasons of budget and environmental policies seem designed to exclude people in favor of wildlife. Access roads are also abandoned making access more difficult. And finally, trailhead information and trail signs are poorly maintained. The access, information, and maintenance of our Federal estate compare poorly to other countries such as Canada, New Zealand, and Switzerland.

In conclusion, it appears that the cause of the decline in outdoor recreation is a complex combination of sociological changes together with unavailability and poor access to good places to do outdoor recreation.

What are the effects of the decline in Outdoor Recreation?

The decline in outdoor recreation affects human health and the constituency for conservation advocacy.

Human health effects are generally as follows:

- Physical fitness, obesity, diabetes
- Psychological health
- Intellectual performance

There are countless studies on this subject on everything from lack of recess affecting elementary school test scores and even ADHD. For simplicity, I will just quote Cheryl Charles's summary of one of these studies:

“Unstructured free play in the out-of-doors brings a host of benefits to children—from being smarter to more cooperative to healthier overall. This well-documented article by two physicians builds a strong case for the importance of unstructured free play in the out-of-doors for all age groups, and especially young children. While concerned about the “obesity epidemic” in young children, the authors say that the health benefits from outdoor play are only one aspect of the overall benefits. They suggest that the concept of “play” is more compelling and inviting to most adult caregivers, parents and guardians than “exercise.” The authors cite cognitive benefits from play in nature, including creativity, problem-solving, focus and self-discipline. Social benefits include cooperation, flexibility, and self-awareness. Emotional benefits include stress reduction, reduced aggression and increased happiness. Children will be smarter, better able to get along with others, healthier and happier when they have regular opportunities for free and unstructured play in the out-of-doors.” [40] [26]

It's interesting to note that this is a more technical way of saying what John Muir meant when he said:

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”

The effect of the decline in outdoor usage on the conservation constituency is profound. At present, the membership of the major national conservation organizations (The Nature Conservancy, The Wilderness Society, NPCA, Defender of Wildlife) is primarily elderly Caucasians. And surveys of these members show that overwhelmingly their affiliation comes from outdoor experiences. Peter Karieva, Chief Scientist for The Nature Conservancy states: “One hypothesis is that the environmental choices humans make depend to a great measure on the connection between humans and nature, and on a broad human appreciation of nature's constraints and workings.” [27]

Kareiva goes on to say [27]:

“The depth of support for environmental issues is not as strong as some polls indicate. For instance, although nearly 80% of Americans favor ‘stronger national standards to protect our air, land, and water,’ environment concerns typically come in last place when individuals are asked to rank the environment against other important issues ...

Successful nature conservation and sustainable ecosystems will require a battle for the hearts and minds of people. Unfortunately, the national and global trends in public attitudes are not clear, nor do we know how to most effectively influence trends in those attitudes ... the pervasive decline in nature recreation may well be the world's greatest environmental threat.”

In Scientific American, Wesley Schultz comments [28]: “A recent article by researchers at the University of Rochester shows that experiences with nature can affect more than our mood. In a series of studies, Netta Weinstein, Andrew Przybylski, and Richard Ryan, University of Rochester, show that exposure to nature can affect our priorities and alter what we think is important in life. In short, we become less self-focused and more other-focused. Our value priorities shift from personal gain, to a broader focus on community and connection with others.” [29]

On October 7, 2009, Zaradic and others published a reviewed article where they studied outdoor activities and their correlation to donations to four representative conservation organizations: The Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund, the Sierra Club and Environmental Defense. It appeared that donations (after a 12-year lag) are only strongly correlated with intense outdoor activities like backpacking and hiking [30]. This is an important study, but still leaves many questions unanswered. Further work along these lines may better clarify the connection between philanthropy and outdoor recreation.

In conclusion, the negative effects of the decline in outdoor recreation are enormous. Outdoor recreation is very important to human health and a key factor correlated to the support of environmental conservation.

What are the remedies for the decline in Outdoor Recreation and what are the obstacles?

Earlier, I discussed how sociological and demographic changes have strongly affected outdoor recreation. But, even if one wanted to, it would be very difficult to alter those trends. In my opinion, there are two remedies that can be effective. First, we can build up organizations and programs that enable people to get outdoors. Second, we can create more outdoor destination infrastructure and make it easily accessible.

Organizations and Programs:

Let's start with how we can build up organizations and programs that enable people to get outdoors.

Today, there are many relatively small programs that enable diverse youth. Examples would be Passages NW in Seattle, Outdoor Outreach in San Diego, GirlVentures in the Bay area, and Rite of Passage Journeys in Snohomish – these are just a few organizations that I have worked with. They do great work and have innovative but different approaches. I think of these as the “start ups.” They are often launched with a creative, entrepreneurial Executive Director who, with a dedicated staff, works heroic hours to get the job done. Most of these serve around 500 kids and have annual budgets of well under a million dollars. What's needed is to have these organizations better networked together to share resources and, in many cases, be merged together.

What are missing are the large organizations. I am targeting a few, starting with the YMCA, and then perhaps Boys and Girls clubs.

The YMCA has strong national presence and great community connections, but it isn't always very innovative and doesn't do much outdoors beyond traditional summer camps. The exceptions are some pilot programs such as the Seattle Metrocenter's program called BOLD which today serves 100+ kids and will expand to Tacoma this year. YMCA's new community center in Newcastle is also starting a pilot program this year. The grand plan is that the YMCA will have a broad set of programs across the country. There is a California-wide program called “Naturalists-at-Large” that might also achieve critical mass.

I would also like to see rejuvenation of outdoor clubs like the Mountaineers and the Colorado Mountain Club. It's not clear that this can be done, but it seems to be worth a try. The Mountaineers' board chair, Eric Linxweiler, wants to double their membership to 15-20 thousand members and to that end has hired a new, energetic Executive Director – a 32 year-old woman.

I like the Sierra Club's volunteer-based program, “Inner City Outings.” It might be a model for other programs. I also like REI's “Outdoor School.” It reaches a

somewhat older demographic and provides easy-entry outdoor experiences. I am also familiar with some programs that target family units and this seems like a great approach and one that could also be folded into some larger organizations like the YMCA.

Private schools have some great outdoor programs, and I would like to see programs at public schools; but right now, that might be hard given the funding crunch for most school systems.

It's essential to see National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) prosper. They provide many outdoor instructors / leaders. They need a better pipeline to more diverse populations.

It is important to note here that I am emphasizing outdoor recreation which might be thought of as simply "play." And actually, "play" is the right word. When many people hear about declining connection with nature, their suggested remedy is environmental education or stewardship. And certainly, these are important things. But, what is really needed is the connection first; the other two will likely follow – you learn about and take care of what you love. Outdoor play is really what is needed [33].

If we can build the enabling organizations and clubs and have a good, diverse population of outdoor instructors, then we might be able to see progress towards getting folks outdoors.

Accessible Outdoor Destinations:

Outdoor destinations need to start close to people's homes which is why city parks are so important. Earlier I mentioned the Trust for Public Land's efforts to expand the nation's city park system [21]. This is a complex subject, but one that has received much attention.

Larger landscape outdoor destinations are relatively abundant in the West because of Federal Public Lands. In the East and Midwest, the opposite is true. However, there is a very strong Land Trust Movement that is especially strong in the East. Unfortunately, the public does not have access to land trust land. But this might change. The Land Trust Alliance (LTA) is the organization that is certifying land trusts. One idea being considered by LTA is that in exchange for their tax-exempt status, land trusts might need to offer greater public access. The nation's largest land trust is The Nature Conservancy, and they are feeling pressure to offer more public access.

As stated before, the largest place for outdoor recreation is the Federal Public Lands that are managed by the Department of Agriculture – the National Forests – and those managed by the Department of Interior where lands are separated into those managed by the National Park Service (NPS), the Bureau of Land

Management (BLM), and the Fish and Wildlife Service (F&WS). For a start, it is hard to imagine a more byzantine management system than what we have for our Federal Lands. Each agency uses different rules and web sites. And to make it worse, even units within each agency are different. The web information and rules for all the Federal lands are a nightmare of confusion and contradiction. It's surprising when you visit a small country like New Zealand. All public access to national land is handled through a single agency that has information bureaus throughout the country. In order to make our public lands more accessible, the US agencies need a single, accessible interface for the public and more uniform rules. And the agencies need to see the recreational public as their customer and present a more welcoming face because many of the agencies today seem to "view visitors as an impediment." [24]

The country needs to increase agency budgets and demand that they provide better recreation infrastructure. At present, you cannot get a trail built even if you provide the agency the money. Here in Washington, we have an excellent example of an NGO (non-governmental organization) having a major impact on recreation infrastructure that encourages outdoor recreation – *The Mountains to Sound Greenway*. This organization has vastly improved the I-90 corridor with trails and other outdoor recreation opportunities. They partner with everyone including groups like WTA which do volunteer trail construction and maintenance. In the 20 years that the Greenway has done these projects, the Forest Service land that borders the corridor has not added a single trail. All the new Greenway trails have been done on private or state land.

Overcoming the Obstacles:

So what are the obstacles and how can they be overcome? As mentioned above, getting a streamlined Federal Agency structure with better budgets would help immensely.

The Outdoor Industry is quite concerned about outdoor recreation trends, but has yet to develop a coherent set of policies to improve the situation. Furthermore, some of the businesses, such as existing permitted outfitters, actually see themselves at cross purposes with other outdoor advocacy groups. It's important that the Outdoor Industry takes a long view of the recreation issues.

We need conservation organizations to put some effort into advocating for outdoor recreation. We don't need the attitude that was best exemplified by a well-known NW conservation author who once complained to the Forest Service, "I hate to see kids out on a trail. They make a lot of noise and scare the animals." Today, most conservation organizations have few programs related to the issue of "connection with the outdoors." They are primarily concerned with their own present-day issues: protecting a given area, passing legislation, or winning a legal motion. They seem to ignore the fact that they will ultimately lose their constituency if they cannot attract new converts. Some conservation

organizations actively oppose recreation on Federal Land and view all humans and human activity as transgressions. As Bill Cronon suggests, instead of working to exclude humans from a wilderness landscape, environmentalists should help us learn to live sustainably with nature [35].

There are also hopeful signs. Some organizations are beginning to actively work the connection issue. The National Wildlife Federation has made Climate Change and Kids in the Outdoors their primary issues. The Wilderness Society has articulated a recreation vision and made recreation one of its five key programs. They even changed their mission statement to be, "Protect wilderness and inspire Americans to care for our wild places." When conservation organizations support sustainable recreation with a well thought-out advocacy, it will have a major effect on the Federal, State, and Municipal agencies.

In conclusion, I believe we can significantly improve outdoor recreation by a combination of more effective "enabling" organizations and better, more accessible outdoor destinations and infrastructure. To accomplish these improvements, we need the enthusiastic backing of the conservation community.

Final thoughts:

In spite of the decline in outdoor recreation, I do see considerable hope for the future. People are alarmed by the associated health trends, and both private foundations and governments are beginning to take action. Salazar, the new Interior Secretary, has declared “youth engagement” to be one of his three highest priorities. The new National Park Service Director, Jon Jarvis, together with many enlightened superintendants like Chip Jenkins, have acknowledged the challenges and the disconnect that the parks face. Jarvis has asked: “What is the biggest issue facing the NPS into the future? The majority answer, ‘relevancy.’ There is deep concern out there that national parks will become irrelevant to a society that is disconnected from nature and history.”

There is similar movement with the Dept. of Agriculture and the Forest Service.

Everyday there are more community organizations and outdoor clubs working to provide people more outdoor recreation opportunities. Stronger leadership has emerged in the outdoor industry and we can expect them to put forth new initiatives. I also hope that the conservation community will wake up and support sustainable recreation. With their help we can create better government policies.

By increasing awareness of the issues and benefits, enabling exposure and access to the outdoors, and taking action, we can work to reverse people’s disconnect from nature and the decline in outdoor recreation.

I started with John Muir, so I will end with another of his thoughts:

“Doubly happy, however, is the person to whom lofty mountain tops are within reach, for the lights that shine there illumine all that lies below.”

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