

“Society Has an Indoor Kid Issue”

A recent issue of Texas Wildlife (the magazine of the Texas Wildlife Association) carried an article with the above title. It was a quotation by Margaret Lamar of the Children & Nature Network, an organization working to connect children, families and their communities to nature, speaking at a recent gathering of conservationists.

The organization was founded by Richard Louv, author of “Last Child in the Woods” in which he first used the phrase “nature deficit disorder” to describe the situation today that most kids spend very little time outdoors and even less time in any environment that would be considered “natural”. Lamar stated that, “Kids today do not understand nor do they care where their food and water comes from.”

A recent survey found that 8 year old kids spend 8 hours a day on electronic media, and that teenagers, similarly, spend 11 hours a day. Another survey found that kids are only spending 2 to 7 minutes a day on outdoor constructive play.

Remember a few years back when the paper carried a front page picture of a man with a trailer and a milk cow and a milking machine? He pulled the trailer and the cow around to various schools so that he could show kids the cow being milked. Many kids, even in Kerrville, didn't know that was where their milk came from.

Lamar described her own efforts to teach her children about nature, saying, “We're trying to make the land really meaningful for not just me and my family but for my children's children. That doesn't come from understanding the real estate value of the land. It comes from having the knowledge needed to take care of it”.

This lack of connection to the land by today's Texans (86 percent of all Texans now live in urban areas) is not just the younger members of the population. Many, probably most, urban adults are pretty much unaware of their dependence on natural areas.

Neal Wilkins, a Texas Wildlife Association member and another speaker at the same meeting, related a story about an urban woman in San Antonio. She was telling him about a drive she took through the Hill Country and specifically on the road from Comfort to Fredericksburg.

And Wilkins said, “She talked about seeing all this vacant land, and she wondered what they were going to do with it. She had no idea that it wasn't vacant land, that it was actually owned by someone”. He said, “She went on to ask why they keep people out.”

Wilkins said, “Most people do not understand what we mean when we talk about private lands with public benefits...a dangerously large number don't know what we're talking about when we say private land.”

I would like to highlight two programs that I believe do a terrific job of helping to fight nature deficit disorder and teach kids about all aspects of nature and wildlife in Texas. One is a series of “summer camp” type activities sponsored by several state agencies, as well as TWA, called the Texas Brigades, in which kids are taught not only about various nature topics, but how they should treat nature, wildlife and each other.

The TWA sponsored L.A.N.D.S. program (Learning Across New Dimensions in Science) is a program in which whole classes of school children are taken out to a rural ranch for a day and taught many things about nature, wildlife, ranching and rural living. These programs require many educated volunteers (as well as volunteer landowners) to conduct such a program for, often, hundreds of school kids. I am especially happy that many of the volunteers in this area are Hill Country Master Naturalists, and they report the activity is one of the most meaningful activities they participate in. And the kids say the same thing.

But activities such as these can only do so much. Parents need to work to see to it that their kids are exposed to some form of a nature experience as often as possible. That may include walks in the woods or by the river, taking them to programs on nature at Riverside Nature Center or Cibolo Nature Center, or to state and city parks. Buy them books about nature and how to identify critters and plants (and yes, there are apps for that!).

You don't want your child to grow up like the woman who thought the land was “vacant”.

Until next time...

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