

Adult Nature Deficit Disorder (C. Jester, 2008)

Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD), a phrase coined within the work of Richard Louv entitled "Last Child in the Woods," has caught widespread attention across the country (and is beginning to make its way farther into the world). As that attention focuses on the effect that nature disconnection has on children and their lives, it's been surprising to learn that any action to reconnect adults and nature on a grander scale, while being studied, is being overlooked.

I work with adults to address NDD and assist them with enriching their quality of life by reconnecting them with nature. This is very similar to NDD in children, except there simply has not been as much focus in the "mainstream" about NDD and adults. Studies abound as to why time spent with nature is good for us on nearly every level, but adults have an easier time prioritizing other responsibilities before the act of going outside. It seems easier to overlook nature time because we don't really have anyone else monitoring our well-being in the way that parents look out for their children.

That said, parents (and any adult that the child looks up to) need to lead by example instead of just promoting nature-time for the kids. The inspiration of seeing their parents/role models out there with them is much more significant to assure future excitement and participation with nature than simply sending them into an activity on their own. Not only is it reinforcing for the kids, but the adults will also gain the same benefits.

We can shape the future of our culture's perspective on nature, the spectrum of health, the world we live in, and the environment by providing time in nature for kids now, but we can also shift our present thinking and actions by reaching out to help adults create greater balance and connection with nature in their own lives now.

Why is the NDD movement focused on youth?

There are a few elements that are at play with the NDD movement being child-centric right now. One of the biggest is nostalgia. Adults see a reflection of themselves in the children in their lives. We wonder, "is this young person going to have a childhood that is as good as or better than mine?" We can remember, then, what it was like when we were kids, how we spent our time, the fun things that we did - the "good ol' days," in a sense.

We begin to feel a disconnection from the way we see today's youth living their childhood compared to how we lived ours. Video games, educational programming, and higher technological learning are necessarily important. But we know the experiences we learned simply by riding bikes with kids in the neighborhood, catching frogs or butterflies, or laying in the grass and gazing at shape-shifting clouds. It's not so much a feeling of wanting to pull them away from the development of modern tech skills. Instead, it's the driving desire to help

them connect to the world that exists around them for their benefit and overall balance as humans.

Is there convincing evidence that shows this might affect adults too?

If we take a look at our society over the last several decades, we see dramatically changing statistics: obesity rates, increases in medical prescriptions, depression, fatigue, insomnia, heart health, ADD/ ADHD, being over-stressed, and even relationship success. We have shifted away from being a culture that spent most of our working days outside, to one that keeps us indoors, on average, for most hours of the day. Our cycles are repetitive and spirit-crushing at times. We have constant visual and auditory stimulation throughout the day, which also drains us.

Doctors, scientists, therapists, coaches, instructors, and day-to-day individuals alike are beginning to see the alignment between these health and well-being statistics and our society's lack of daily interaction with nature and the outdoors. Adults harbor fears of the great outdoors unnecessarily because they have never had the opportunity to learn otherwise or, even more, experience the feeling of awe and curiosity that nature invokes. People have even less of an understanding of the nature of their own bodies, which perpetuates our disconnection.

Adults, throughout their lives, can be heard repeating statements similar to, "I feel like I'm looking for something, but don't know what it is," or "I feel as though something is missing," and even "I just don't know what I want." These are all statements and feelings which cause unrest and turmoil in our minds and hearts. For a very long time, humans have returned to the natural world to soothe those aches and curiosities - even to find answers.

Poets write about nature, authors put it into words, artists paint it, musicians create it, and philosophers wonder over it, yet nowadays we have not reached through our lifestyles and busy-ness to find our own sense of peace, wonder, and connection to something that feels bigger.

Why should we care and what should be done to help everyone get outside?

The documentary, "National Parks: America's Best Idea," by Ken Burns, provided us with an amazing view of the spirit in which our idea about nature and wilderness has manifested and continues to pull at our existence. As seen from advertisements on TV, at bank ATMs, on the internet, and on social media for this documentary's debut, this became more than a nice "flick" to watch: it became a phenomenon. Our instinct is already there: we already care.

We care because even though we may seem more removed from the natural world than our own ancestors did, we are a part of nature and its cycles. Physically, when we're outdoors, we can't help but move in some way or another. Mentally, we feel refreshed, recharged, and rejuvenated. Emotionally, we feel more even and centered. Spiritually, we can feel the greater connection to the creativity that's around us and within us. Environmentally, what we do to the

planet both directly and indirectly affects us. We are all included in these natural cycles and we depend on them for our existence.

Options for adults to get outside are as unique as the individual. Volunteering for the benefit of nature, ourselves, and our communities is a great place to start. Hiking, biking, walking around the neighborhood, star-gazing, taking kids outdoors, gardening, adding plants to our living space, listening to our own bodies... the list goes on.

The Children and Nature Network's movement is a wonderful example of a system to promote nature connection with children that is making huge waves. As adults, we sometimes view ourselves as more complex than children, having more responsibility or stress. While that could be true, it doesn't lessen the impact of spending time outside. To reach a larger, more diverse audience, reversing the effects of NDD in the majority of the population will require something similar to C&NN's programs for adults. Incentivizing, making games or fitness-focused programs for adults outdoors, or creating more clubs that allow for accessibility for more soon-to-be outdoor enthusiasts. While these may seem idealistic to many, undertaking even a couple of these ideas would create huge leaps toward improved quality of life for the majority of our country's population and for our nation's wild and green spaces.

It's Time to Go Outside!