

## ***Dialogue: Richard Louv & Paul Freedman,***

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#### **Abstract**

Author Richard Louv chats with HER co-editor Paul Freedman about his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, the meaning of Nature-Deficit Disorder, and the centrality of connection to nature in holistic education.

Keywords: nature, pedagogy, wellness, holistic education

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**Paul Freedman-** Good morning, Richard. On behalf of the HER readers and editors, I'd like to express my gratitude for you making the time to join me for this dialogue. And of course, I'd also like to thank you for your prodigious contribution to the field of nature-based learning. In so many ways, your groundbreaking work, including the coining of the phrase "Nature Deficit Disorder" has brought widespread attention to the dangers and consequences of replacing humans' evolved relationship with ecological systems to one where our primary "environment" is based on interfacing with screens. It's an honor to welcome you into this dialogue.

**Richard Louv-** My pleasure, Paul. It's an honor to be talking with you.

**PF-** *Last Child In the Woods* is a huge bestseller and I believe played a significant role in coalescing a movement towards legitimizing and elevating nature-based learning as well as unstructured play in nature. That must have given you a lot of hope. As you look back over the seventeen years since publication, where can you see evidence of progress?

**RL-** The barriers between people and nature remain challenging. But we're seeing some change. Over the past decade, a movement has emerged to reconnect children,

families and communities to the natural world. It includes educators, pediatricians, urban planners, business people, and policymakers. Because this movement includes people of all ages, I call it the New Nature Movement. We're at a crucial point in this movement. In the U.S. we're beginning to see progress in state legislatures, businesses, civic organizations, schools, and government agencies. A recent study in the U.S., "The Nature of Americans," suggests that people appear to be much more knowledgeable than a decade ago about the connection between nature experience and health, but somewhat less aware of the connection to cognitive functioning and education. One new element is the pandemic. Covid has increased awareness that the outdoor classroom benefits both health and cognition. It has also increased public awareness of inequitable distribution of parks and other outdoor spaces. Another positive change is the trend of pediatricians and other health care providers in the U.S. and Canada, and other countries, who are prescribing nature connection to families. Regional campaigns to connect kids to nature have sprung up around the country. Family nature clubs (multiple families who, for example, band together for hikes and other outdoor adventures, helping reduce parental fear) are proliferating. (The family nature club in San Diego contains some 3,000 families, for example.)

One of the most striking transformations is the growth of research on the benefits of nature experience to mental and physical health and to cognitive functioning, and more. When I was researching *Last Child in the Woods*, I could only find about 60 studies that I felt comfortable citing. Now, if you go to the Children & Nature Network (the nonprofit that grew out of “Last Child”) you’ll find independently written abstracts of over 1,000 studies in our free online research library. Internationally, we see a growing movement to declare nature access to be a human right, an idea I wrote about first in Orion magazine, then in my book *The Nature Principle*, and most recently a cover article in the Sierra Club’s Sierra magazine. Here’s a link to that article, republished by the Children & Nature Network. The notion is gaining traction. In September 2012, the World Congress of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) cited “adverse consequences for both healthy child development (‘nature deficit disorder’) as well as responsible stewardship for nature and the environment in the future,” and then passed a resolution titled “The Child’s Right to Connect with Nature and to a Healthy Environment.” This connection is, indeed, a human right. And the acknowledgement of that is progress.

**PF-** We see that children of lower socio-economic status have less access to nature and nature-based learning. This includes having less access to private schools, parents with yards and vacations, etc. What ideas do you have for restructuring public schools to facilitate more equitable access to nature-based education?

**RL-** Clearly, connecting people to nature can be a matter of life and death. Nature connection isn’t a panacea, but for many children and adults it can make all the difference. In 2018, researchers in the UK reported, for people in greener neighborhoods, significant reduction in diastolic blood pressure, stress-related salivary cortisol, heart rate and diabetes. In addition, time in green space appears to reduce the risk of preterm birth, premature death and high blood pressure. And yet, in the U.S. and many other countries, the amount of tree canopy and open space in affluent neighborhoods dwarfs that in lower-income urban communities. We know that, in many children, time spent in nature can reduce symptoms of ADHD; adolescent boys participating in outdoor education with limited use of electronic media show immediate and sustained benefits in creative thinking; greater density of tree canopy beyond the school grounds predicts higher academic performance of

high school students; and children living in greener urban neighborhoods have better spatial working memory. A study in Massachusetts links higher standardized test scores to the greening of schools. Even more research links nature time to better health, which of course has something to do with education outcomes. These are just a few samples of the gathering research. I want to emphasize that, despite the good news we’re seeing on several fronts, we have far, far to go.

In education, I’ve been so impressed with the many teachers I’ve met who have insisted on exposing their students directly to nature, despite ongoing trends in the opposite direction. It’s true that teachers are asked to do too much, often confront district bureaucracies and fear litigation. Connecting students to nature is generally not taught in teachers’ colleges (there are a couple exceptions, mentioned in “Vitamin N”). While many school districts in the U.S. are going in the opposite direction, toward less physical movement and more testing, more hours at desks or in the classroom, or on screens (understandable during the pandemic) a counter trend is growing, toward school gardens, natural play areas, getting kids out of the classroom, using the natural world as a learning environment. In recent years, the number of nature-based preschools in the U.S. has grown rapidly, an increase that began even before the pandemic. That effort is picking up speed. We may be seeing the beginning to see the true greening of American education. Biophilic design is catching on —schools designed with nature in mind, in the classroom and around the school; old schools are being refitted with playscapes that incorporate nature into the central design principle. Another approach is the use of nature preserves by environment-based schools, or the inclusion of established farms and ranches as part of these “new schoolyards. In education, for every dollar we spend on the virtual, we should spend at least another dollar on the real — especially on creating more learning environments in natural settings.\*

**PF-** Climate change is finally being more universally accepted as a climate crisis across all strata of society around the world. How do the obvious threats to the sustainability of our planet change the discourse, narrative or your approach to reconnecting people with nature?

**RL-** Even if you only glance at the morning headlines, it’s hard to miss the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: climate

disruption, biodiversity collapse, zoonotic pandemics, and human loneliness — our disconnection from nature, and from each other. These four interacting forces represent a single existential threat, the shadow in the corner, always there. It infects us with fear, a sense of helplessness, cynicism, panic. Like COVID, eco-anxiety has long-term implications. In 2016, a report issued by the American Psychological Association, Climate for Health, and ecoAmerica (a nonprofit for which I served as a charter board member) projected long-term societal damage caused by eco-anxiety, including interpersonal and intergroup aggression, and loss of social identity and cohesion, especially for “Indigenous communities, children and communities dependent on the natural environment.” To confront both our despair and the physical threats, we need to envision the Four Horsemen riding one horse. We won’t be able to do much about any one of them unless we address the other three, simultaneously. This is one reason that dramatically increasing the number of trees in the world is so important; doing so addresses all four of the threats. It’s also why connecting people directly, emotionally, instinctively to the natural world is essential.

Without direct physical contact with the natural world, children’s knowledge about the environment is abstract, for the most part, and they tend to see a world with problems that are overwhelming. I often say that children know a lot about climate change and the cutting of the Amazon rainforest, but can’t tell you about what lives in the vacant lots or lakes or parks in their own area. Not that they don’t want to know. The great worth of outdoor programs generally is their focus on the elements that have always united humankind: rain, wind, warm sun, forests deep and dark, stone — and the awe and amazement that our Earth inspires, especially during a child’s formative years. Contact with nature allows children to see they are part of a larger world that includes them. If children are given the opportunity to experience nature, even in simple ways, interaction, engagement and psychological healing follow naturally. A reliance only on data and logic is clearly not enough. We need at least two additional ways to move people from knowledge to caring to action. The first is love — deep emotional attachment to the nature around us. The second element is imaginative hope, an ability to describe a future worth creating. Today, educators are in the best position to help children imagine a world they’ll want to go to, and to help them begin to create it.

**PF-** Readers of HER tend to lean towards an integral or holistic worldview; they see all beings as deeply connected, rooted in relationship; they understand the cosmos to be an expanding fractal-like pattern of wholes within wholes; and they see the whole as always being qualitatively more than the sum of its parts. With this worldview in mind, why is connection to nature of such inherent consequence?

**RL-** The human spirit is inseparable from the natural world. As the eco-theologian Thomas Berry wrote, “A degraded habitat will produce degraded humans.” The concept of an “ecological unconscious” has emerged at the crossroads of science, philosophy and theology. This is the idea that all of nature is connected in ways that we do not fully understand, and no matter our cultural or ethnic background, we share those connections—though we may perceive them differently. After “Last Child” was published, I was surprised that so many religious figures, on the right and the left, were supportive of it. I came to the conclusion that they intuitively understand that all spiritual life begins with a sense of wonder. Nature is our most immediate, shared window into wonder. This is not just a view into the past but into possibility. I avoid the phrase “back to nature.” I prefer to say, “Forward to nature.”

### Acknowledgement

Richard Louv is a journalist and author of 10 books, including *Our Wild Calling: How Connecting With Animals Can Transform Our Lives - And Save Theirs*, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, *The Nature Principle: Reconnecting with Life in a Virtual Age* and *Vitamin N: The Essential Guide to a Nature-Rich Life: 500 Ways to Enrich Your Family’s Health & Happiness*. His books have been translated and published in 24 countries, and helped launch an international movement to connect children, families and communities to nature. He is co-founder and chairman emeritus of the Children & Nature Network, an organization helping build the movement.

He appears frequently on national radio and television programs, including the Today Show, CBS Evening News, and NPR’s Fresh Air. He speaks internationally on nature-deficit disorder, a concept he first introduced in *Last Child in the Woods*; on the importance of children’s and adults’ exposure to nature for their health, and on the need for environmental protection and preservation for greater access to nature and the health of the Earth. Among others,

he has presented keynote addresses at the American Academy of Pediatrics National Conference; the USC Institute for Integrative Health Conference; the first White House Summit on Environmental Education; the Congress of the New Urbanism; the International Healthy Parks Conference in Melbourne, Australia; and the national Friends of Nature Conference in Beijing, China.

In 2008, he was awarded the national Audubon Medal; prior recipients included Rachel Carson, E.O. Wilson and President Jimmy Carter. He is also a recipient of the San Diego Zoological Society Conservation Medal; the George B. Rabb Conservation Medal from the Chicago Zoological Society; the International Making Cities Livable Jane Jacobs Award; and the Cox Award, Clemson University's highest honor for "sustained achievement in public service." In 2018, he received an Honorary Doctorate from the NewSchool of Architecture & Design.

As a journalist and commentator, Louv has written for The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Times of London, Orion, Outside and other newspapers and magazines. He was a columnist for The San Diego Union-Tribune and Parents magazine. Louv has served as a visiting scholar for Clemson University and Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management. He is a member of the editorial board of the journal Ecopsychology. With artist Robert Bateman, he serves as honorary co-chair of Canada's Child in Nature Alliance. He is also on the advisory boards of Biophilic Cities and the International Association of Nature Pedagogy.

He would rather hike than write.