

Section: Insight

Environmental education boosts brains, helps our world

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I used to take my grandchildren deep into the woods near our house in Bothell, to a large anthill at the base of a huge maple tree. We could watch the ants for hours, looking at how they would inspect their food, how they'd work together like a family and how their hill functioned like a city.

It became a ritual. My grandkids would jump on their bikes and say, "Let's see what the ants are doing!"

Then, a few years ago, some 55 houses went up, and our small woodland refuge disappeared.

I have no problem with the housing development. Growth is a fact of life around here. But I want to save the experience children get when they spend time outdoors, learning in the way that nature teaches best.

That's why I was so pleased to see Gov. Chris Gregoire and William Ruckelshaus launch the E3 Washington initiative to improve environmental education opportunities for Washington children and adults.

Playing and learning in the outdoors – whether in an urban park, a suburban field, or in the wide open spaces in rural areas – has been a way of life for generations in Washington, blessed with mountains, tide pools, forests, fish and wildlife.

By both design and serendipity, bats have taught us about radar, honeybees have taught us about working together, and overnight trips to state parks have taught us about self-reliance.

But those experiences are endangered. Our world is becoming more urban and less natural. Our kids are learning more and more by sitting at desks and watching screens. Video game and computer use are on the rise and park visits on the decline. Researchers have even coined a term for the phenomenon – "videophilia."

There's another term out there – "nature deficit disorder" – and Richard Louv, in his excellent book "Last Child in the Woods," cites studies showing that time in nature can reduce obesity, depression and attention-deficit disorder.

To protect our environment well into the future, we need to teach the next generation how to value it. Environmental education can help do that.

A growing body of research is saying that outdoor learning can provide benefits in other ways, too.

Environmental education combines classroom subjects like math, science and social studies and teaches them through real-life situations. Students learn about satellites by following radio-collared cougars. They

use math and science to build nesting boxes for Western bluebirds. Students are more focused and motivated. They cultivate a habit of thinking critically and applying school lessons to their community and world.

The results are remarkable. Last year, Catherine Taylor, a University of Washington professor of educational psychology, found students with environmental education experiences performed better on standard tests like the WASL. The Environmental Education Association of Washington reported similar findings in a report issued two years ago.

That report, which the association issued with Audubon Washington and the state Department of Natural Resources, gave the state a D grade for its support of environmental education.

The initiative launched last month, called “E3 Washington” for education, environment and economy, will help address the problem. Educators and local leaders will coordinate E3 summits across the state and develop environmental education goals in schools, government agencies, businesses, zoos and aquariums. The summits will help create a statewide, comprehensive strategy for teacher training and materials, among other priorities to implement these quality programs. They will lead the way to bring environmental education to children and adults throughout the state.

When I first went door to door campaigning for the Senate, I met a girl tidying up in front of her home. “I’m taking care of our world,” she told me.

I like to think environmental education will have more people saying that.

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