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Program aims to rediscover nature

By SAUL WEISBERG

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Many children in Bellingham can tell us more about the Amazon Rain Forest than Whatcom Falls Park. They know more about zoo animals from a trip to Seattle than wild salmon in Padden Creek or the mountain goats that live on the slopes of Hannegan Pass.

When I was a kid, we knew our backyards and local parks intimately. We spent all of our free time outdoors and went camping every summer. That's not how it is for many children today.

Within a single generation, the ways in which children experience nature have changed dramatically. Today, kids' physical connections and intimacy with nature have all but disappeared.

Journalist Richard Louv explored this topic in his recent book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. He found a startling shift in our relationship to nature. Our society teaches young people to avoid direct experiences in nature in favor of organized sports, video games and afterschool programs that have taken the place of unstructured time messing around outside.

We believe that children need good nutrition, excellent schools and a strong family network. But Louv documents a growing body of research that also links our mental, physical and spiritual health directly to our connections with nature.

In my work at North Cascades Institute, these moments of connection with nature are such a regular occurrence that they are easy to take for granted. But it helps remind me of the value of the work that we do, the nitty-gritty job of environmental education, to hold on to these moments.

So I keep alive the memory of the fourth-grader who, when asked what he had learned at one of the Institute's programs, replied, I never knew I lived in such a special place. Or the Chinese-American high school student who, after a grueling week of trail stewardship work and learning about our nation's wilderness lands in the backcountry of Ross Lake, exclaimed, Before I came to this camp I didn't really care about what was going on in the United States. I thought, this isn't my county I don't love it like I love my own. Now that I am here, I started to care what happens to the North Cascades.

Robert Michael Pyle, Northwest author and institute instructor, once wrote that People who care conserve; people who don't know don't care. What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known a wren?

That sentiment motivates my work in environmental education, and that knowing and caring is a birthright I wish for everybody living here in the spectacular Pacific Northwest.

I am grateful that our local leaders are demonstrating that they understand the value of learning about home landscapes by launching a new initiative to improve lifelong environmental education opportunities for everybody who works, lives and plays in Washington state.

The initiative is called E3 Washington for education, environment and economy. Gov. Chris Gregoire, joined by William Ruckelshaus, the former head of the Environmental Protection Agency, are program co-chairs, providing enthusiasm and clout to get the process rolling. State Rep. Dave Quall, DMount Vernon, is the visionary behind the idea, which passed with strong legislative support this past spring.

The goals of E3 include enhanced teacher training, improved test scores and graduation rates, secure public and private funding for environmental education and a future of environmental literacy and sustainable society.

Over the next year, educators, students, local business leaders, tribal members, government officials and naturalists will gather in E3 summits across the state to develop regional action plans that will result in a statewide plan to optimize environmental education for our schools, communities and businesses.

This week, North Cascades Institute and the Environmental Education Association of Washington hosted the E3 Washington Northwest Regional Summit for Whatcom, Skagit and San Juan counties. Together we will build a comprehensive strategy to increase environmental education opportunities in northwest Washington.

Nature is not a spectator sport. We pass on our love of nature by sharing the story with those we care about, and by encouraging them to get outside into nature. I hope we all can say, with passion and conviction, that we all live in a special place.

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