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Editor's Corner: A Return to Nature

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Editor's Corner

February 2008, Notes From the Field Editor

A Return to Nature

I am surrounded by technology. Bemused visitors compare my tiny home office to the control deck of the *Starship Enterprise*, and it's not hard to see why: three computers, four video monitors, high-speed internet, two telephones, two external hard drives, a satellite radio, an iPod, and noise-cancelling headphones. I *love* technology. And yet, I have recently begun wondering, is all this technology really a good thing? What have we wrought?

If my love affair with technology is on the rocks, a recent book by Richard Louv may be partly to blame. In *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), he suggests that, for the first time in human history, young people today are growing up with little or no meaningful contact with the natural world. Louv cites various causes for this "nature-deficit disorder," including loss of green spaces to development, parents' exaggerated fears and over-protectiveness, and our growing addiction to electronic media. Why go to the trouble of actually spending time in natural outdoor places, when you can relax at home and, thanks to high-definition video technology, count the blades of grass while a grizzly bear makes his way across Yellowstone Park on your big screen television?

Louv suggests that our children's alienation from nature might well be linked with maladies like attention-deficit disorder, depression, anxiety, and childhood obesity. These claims need and deserve further testing. At the very least, nature-deficit disorder has serious implications for conservation efforts and our ability to convince young people that nature is something worth saving. Studies have shown that it is important for people to be exposed to natural areas as children if they are to care for them as adults (Duda, Bissell, and Young 1998), and that environmentally responsible behavior results more from direct contact with nature than from knowledge of ecology (Hungerford and Volk 1990).

For evidence to support the notion that we are increasingly alienated from nature, look no further than attendance at U.S. national parks. After 50 years of steady growth, per capita visits to the national parks have declined by about 25% since 1987 (Nielson 2006). In a recent study, Oliver Pergams and Patricia Zaradic (2006) took a rigorous look at potential reasons for this decrease, investigating possible causes, such as changes in family income, number of vacation days, foreign travel, and even the increasing popularity of extreme sports. They found no significant correlation in any of these variables. They did find that rising gasoline prices accounted for some of the decline, but the study also identified a second culprit: our increasing use of electronic entertainment media, including video games, movies, and the internet.

In their "nature versus Nintendo" scenario, Pergams and Zaradic point to the explosion that has occurred in sedentary video-based activities. The per capita park attendance peaked in 1987—by 2003 the average person in the United States spent 327 *more* hours per year on video entertainments.

Of course, correlation does not imply causation, as Alan Colburn points out in his column on p. 10 of this issue of *The Science Teacher* (TST). Still, Pergams and Zaradic make a strong case that increased use of video entertainment represents a dramatic change in social values that can explain much of the recent decline in national park visits. In fact, they conclude that these video entertainment variables combine with gasoline prices to explain 97.5% of this decline.

At stake is far more than the national parks, as important and iconic as they are. Like a coal miner's canary, declining interest in national parks may warn us of a greater danger: a fundamental shift away from an appreciation of nature and the pleasures that only natural places can provide. Sedentary video-intense activities may not only take time away from spending time in nature, they may also make us less likely to *want* to. Pergams and Zariac call this "videophilia." Rickard Louv calls it "nature-deficit disorder." By whatever name, a rose is still a rose—unless, of course, it is the screensaver on your video display.

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Editor's note

I would like to thank William McComas for his invaluable assistance as co-editor of this issue of TST. Be sure to have a look at his interesting lead article, found on p. 24.

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