



Conservation and Childhood

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When I grow up, I'm gonna save the whales. Save the trees. Save the rainforests. I'm gonna reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce the use of plastic, reduce pollution. I'll conserve the land, the air, the water. I'll love the earth.

Because environmental destruction in the modern world is being committed at such a great scale, today's children must, by necessity, grow up to be better conservationists than their parents. So how do we foster a spirit of conservation in children?

I believe that we will conserve only what we respect, and we will respect only what we know. The majority of children (and adults) in the modern Western world know very little about the natural world that sustains them, merely by virtue of having never spent time there. Therefore, the concept of conservation is, all too often, simply an abstraction. Why, after all, should one worry about deforestation when he's never spent time enjoying a forest?

In order to cultivate conservationists, we must allow and encourage children (and adults) to become intimately familiar with the natural world. This may mean turning off the TV (and the computer, the Wii, and the iPod). This may mean going outside to supervise backyard playtime, instead of settling down with a movie in the evening. This may mean providing a fishbowl for the tadpoles children invariably capture, mopping up mud when kids come home from a romp in the creek, investing in guidebooks to local plants and animals, visiting our wonderful state parks and natural areas, and planting and maintaining a garden with children.

(Speaking of gardens, any old garden will do—a flower garden, a vegetable garden, a themed garden, a walled garden, a windowsill garden, a butterfly garden, a garden of weeds. What is important is that the child be involved in creating or maintaining the garden; that the child be allowed and encouraged to spend time in the garden (exploring it, weeding it, watering it, reading a book in it); and that an adult with knowledge and enthusiasm about gardening spends time in the garden with the child.)

Most environmentalists and conservationists cite childhood interactions with the natural world and the presence of an adult who taught them to respect nature as the most important factors in the development of their personal conservation ethic. Examples of such formative childhood experiences in nature can be found in the biographies of many well-known environmentalists.

Presidential biographer Edmund Morris writes that Teddy Roosevelt, conservation's presidential patron, enjoyed childhood pleasures like "building

wigwams in the woods, gathering hickory nuts and apples, hunting frogs, haying and harvesting... scampering barefoot down long, leafy lanes...and [spending] long hours [in] observation of the flora and fauna around him." According to the Theodore Roosevelt Association, Roosevelt was later responsible for bringing over 200 million acres of land under protection, including five national parks, 18 national monuments, 51 national bird reservations, and 150 national forests.

Beatrix Potter, beloved author and naturalist, spent her childhood exploring the natural world and making studies of local flora, fauna, and fungi. As a girl, she dissected dead animals and practiced scientific illustration (in addition to preparing for her famed career as a writer and author of charming books for children). As a woman, she became a pioneer land conservationist in the Lake District of England, ultimately committing some 4,000 acres of land to permanent protection under England's National Trust.

As for myself, I grew up on a farm with a family that loves the land. As a toddler, I carried water in gallon milk jugs to my mother's flowers, picked cucumbers with my uncle, dug holes ("ponds") in the garden with my brother, and planted trees with my dad. As a teenager, I created wildlife food plots through 4-H, kept journals about butterflies and rainfall, and maintained growth charts for my plants. As a college student, I dissected rats and worms and countless perch; collected plants and insects and algae; and researched elementary schoolyard habitats. Now, as an adult, I am a naturalist, a conservationist, and an environmental educator. I spend my days working toward the conservation of the natural world and encouraging children to do the same. Were my childhood experiences in the natural world important to the development of my conservation ethic? Absolutely, undoubtedly, and profoundly.

To foster a spirit of conservation in the next generation, we must introduce children to the wonders of the natural world and model the love for the land we hope they, too, will acquire. This introduction must begin in the forest, the park, the backyard, and the garden.

So, I have to ask you—what will you be doing this weekend? As for me, I'll be in the wilds of the Children's Garden, exploring nature with a group of budding conservationists. Please join us.

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