

Posted on Fri, Sep. 29, 2006

Study: Calif. youths choose computers, TVs over great outdoors

Bay City News Service

With the school year in full swing, a new study by a Foster City foundation reveals that California youths are more likely to have spent their summers captivated by computer games or TV screens than adventuring in the great outdoors.

The Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council's California Summer Youth Survey released its survey Thursday of interviews with 600 parents of children ages 13 to 17 from throughout the state, of which about 18 percent from the Bay Area.

The results show that the numbers of children participating in camps and other outdoor programs over the summer remains substantively lower than the numbers of children who don't participate in these programs.

The land conservation and youth investment foundation's survey revealed that less than one-third of children participated in outdoor educational programs, attended camp, or joined outdoor service projects this summer.

Approximately 59 percent of parents said their children have less interest in the outdoors than in the past. The majority of those parents cited TV, computers and video games as the main reasons their children were not interested in the outdoors.

Other reasons cited by parents included lack of opportunity, lack of parental support, and money and transportation difficulties.

In addition, access for children from lower-income families to outdoor experiences does not appear to be improving, according to the survey. About two-thirds of parents, the majority of which earned less than \$50,000 per year, said their child spent either the same amount of time outdoors or a lesser amount of time outdoors this summer, as opposed to the previous summer.

Offering hope, another revealing statistic from the survey showed many youth to be committed to environmental causes. About 81 percent of respondents said their child recycles, while 33 percent said their child conserves water.

These results appear to offer evidence that right now, California's children are interested in the environment, but not yet as interested in simply being outdoors.

Also, about half of all parents surveyed said that their child would participate in outdoor activities if they were more easily available.

Stewardship Council Executive Director Jayne Battey said that increased health problems among youth, such as obesity, diabetes and asthma, are major concerns, as well as the trend of young people simply losing touch with the natural world, which could be a danger to future preservation efforts for California's open spaces.

"We feel that getting kids outdoors can be really transformational," she said.

A simple visit to a nature preserve, or even a community park, she said, can give young people a sense of confidence, connection and achievement that they might not have the opportunity to enjoy if they stay in an urban setting.

"Kids learn these lifelong core values at a very early age," Battey said. "If they miss that and don't do it as an adult, they miss a lot. It's like learning a language."

According to Battey, in addition to the many distractions facing children, funding for outdoor programs has dried up in many areas.

Battey said her organization is working to promote outdoor activities for youths, especially in urban areas and in the most economically needy communities. Part of the Stewardship Council's mission is to bring the natural beauty of California to those young people who are least likely to have experienced it, she said.

Through grants to park facilities and other outdoor programs, the Stewardship Council supports a wide range of collaborative programs, including hiking, biking and camping trips, and community garden activities.

To support lower-income families, the Stewardship Council funds scholarships for children to attend outdoor programs, pays for some transportation costs, and offers stipends for work in community service projects, Battey said.

With an endowment of \$30 million over 10 years allocated for its Youth Investment Program, the Stewardship Council has given out \$2.25 million in grants this year to 57 parks and programs in Northern and Central California.

Copyright © 2006 by Bay City News, Inc. -- republication, re-transmission or reuse without the express written consent of Bay City News, Inc. is prohibited.