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Children detach from natural world as they explore the virtual one

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Yosemite may be nice and all, but Tommy Nguyen of San Francisco would much prefer spending his day in front of a new video game or strolling around the mall with his buddies.

What, after all, is a 15-year-old supposed to do in what John Muir called "the grandest of all special temples of nature" without cell phone service?

"I'd rather be at the mall because you can enjoy yourself walking around looking at stuff as opposed to the woods," Nguyen said from the comfort of the Westfield San Francisco Centre mall.

In Yosemite and other parks, he said, frowning his brow to emphasize the absurdly lopsided comparison, "the only thing you look at is the trees, grass and sky."

The notion of going on a hike, camping, fishing or backpacking is foreign to a growing number of young people in cities and suburbs around the nation, according to several polls and studies.

State and national parks, it seems, are good places for old folks to go, but the consensus among the younger set is that hiking boots aren't cool. Besides, images of nature can be downloaded these days.

It isn't just national forests and wilderness areas that young people are avoiding, according to the experts. Kids these days aren't digging holes, building tree houses, catching frogs or lizards, frolicking by the creek or even throwing dirt clods.

"Nature is increasingly an abstraction you watch on a nature channel," said Richard Louv, the author of the book "Last Child in the Woods," an account of how children are slowly disconnecting from the natural world. "That abstract relationship with nature is replacing the kinship with nature that America grew up with."

A lot of it has to do with where people live - 80 percent of the U.S. population lives in urban areas, where the opportunities for outdoor activity apart from supervised playgrounds and playing fields are limited.

But Louv said the problem runs deeper. Wealthy suburban white youngsters are also succumbing to what he calls "nature deficit disorder."

"Anywhere, even in Colorado, the standard answer you get when you ask a kid the last time he was in the mountains is 'I've never been to the mountains,'" Louv said. "And this is in a place where they can see the mountains outside their windows."

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The nature gap is just as big a problem in California, where there are more state and national parks than anywhere else in the country. A recent poll of 333 parents by the Public Policy Institute of California found that 30 percent of teenagers did not participate in any outdoor nature activity at all this past summer. Another 17 percent engaged only once in an outdoor activity like camping, hiking or backpacking.

The numbers coincide with national polls indicating that children and teenagers play outdoors less than young people did in the past. Between 1997 and 2003, the proportion of children ages 9 to 12 who spent time hiking, walking, fishing, playing on the beach or gardening declined 50 percent, according to a University of Maryland study.

Kim Strub, a 46-year-old Mill Valley mother of 13- and 16-year-old girls, said kids these days just don't have the time to get out in nature with all the pressure to get good grades and be accepted into a prestigious college.

"There is probably five times as much homework than there used to be when I was a kid," she said.

"I used to be a member of Campfire Girls, and we would go out camping, sleep under the stars, go hiking, grind acorns, real outdoor stuff," Strub said. "My two daughters have been in Girl Scouts, and when they meet it is primarily indoors. Going outdoors is just not a priority anymore."

The lack of outdoor activity is more pronounced in California's minority and lower-income communities. Latino parents, for example, were twice as likely as white parents to say their child never participated in an outdoor nature activity and three times more likely to say their child did not go to a park, playground or beach this past summer, according to the Public Policy Institute poll.

Several African American, Asian and Latino students from various San Francisco high schools admitted they rarely, if ever, go to the neighborhood park, let alone visit a national or state park.

"We are city kids, so we don't get to experience the outdoors," said Ronnisha Johnson, a 17-year-old senior at Philip Burton High School. "I don't like bugs, and most of my friends don't like wild animals. And they don't teach you about the wilderness in school. Kids don't think of it as a park. They just think of it as a big open space where there is nothing to do."

Video games, television and electronic entertainment are undoubtedly part of the problem. Nguyen, a sophomore at San Francisco's Washington High School, is part of a generation of teenage technophiles who always have a cell phone or iPod in their ear.

Nguyen said he plays video games two hours a day on average, but has been known to spend the whole day in front of a new game. He doesn't know anybody who camps, backpacks or who has ever built a tree fort.

Children between the ages of 8 and 18 spend an average of 6 1/2 hours a day with electronic media, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. The trend starts early. A 2002 study found that 8-year-olds could identify 25 percent more Pokémon characters than wildlife species.

"Everybody is glued to the computer, on Facebook or MySpace, and they're texting all the time," said Brendan Lin, 15, of San Francisco, who wants to be a computer technician when he grows up.

"These kids are becoming so acculturated to very fancy devices that do 50 things at one time that they can't grasp how going out into nature and just looking or relaxing can be rewarding," said Kevin Truitt, the principal of San Francisco's Mission High School. "To go on a hike, to participate in nature, to just look at the beauty is foreign to them."

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Louv does not believe technology is the only reason for the lack of exposure to the outdoors. He said sensationalistic reporting of rare occurrences is a big reason why parents are reluctant to let their children out of the house, let alone wander through the woods or down by the creek.

"Every time CNN or Fox makes a huge story about a lost Boy Scout or a bear attack, it feeds the growing fear that parents and kids have of strangers and of nature itself," Louv said. "The actual number of stranger abductions has actually been level or falling for 20 years, but you would never know it from the media. When they get done telling about the crime, they tell about the trial. And when it's a slow news day, they bring up JonBenet Ramsey again."

Entrance fees at state and national parks also serve as barriers, Louv said. In the inner city, lack of maintenance and violence in the parks deter visitation. In the suburbs, neighborhood regulations discourage young people from using open space, Louv said.

"Just try to put up a basketball court in one of these gated communities, let alone build a tree house," Louv said. "Covenants and restrictions in planned communities often give the impression that playing outdoors is illicit and possibly illegal."

The situation has caused great concern among parents, educators and physicians, many of whom believe the epidemic of childhood obesity in America is a direct result of the lack of outdoor activity.

Environmentalists are worried that the next generation won't give a hoot about the spotted owl or other species. Others foresee trouble if children continue to be deprived of the many physical and psychological benefits that studies have shown nature and the outdoors provide.

A nationwide movement has begun to try to reverse the trend and, in many ways, California is leading the way.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger issued a proclamation in July recognizing a children's outdoor bill of rights, which lists 10 activities children should experience by the time they turn 14, including exploring nature and learning how to swim.

The Golden Gate National Recreation Area engages 30,000 school-age children in outdoor and environmental programs in the park every year, many of them ethnic minorities from the inner city. Numerous outdoor education programs for inner-city youngsters have also been implemented at the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, which borders urban areas of Los Angeles.

The National Park Service and a variety of local environmental organizations, including the San Francisco-based Trust for Public Land, Save the Bay, and the Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council, have joined the effort.

Brendan Lin is an example of how such programs can work. He remembers fondly the one time he went camping on a school graduation trip five years ago or so.

"It was fun because it was quiet and there was no one to bug you. I like that," he said. "I saw deers, squirrels, and I did a rope course."

Louv said he is convinced American youth can once again learn the glory of mucking around in the natural world as opposed to the virtual one.

"We don't all get to go to Yosemite, nor do we have to," he said. "It can be the clump of trees at the end of the cul-de-sac or the ravine by the house. Those places may in terms of biodiversity not be that important,

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but to a child they can be a whole universe, where they can discover a sense of wonder. That is essential to our humanity, and we can't deny that to future generations."

Online resources

Read the Public Policy Institute of California report:

www.ppic.org

Children and Nature Network has information and reports on the issue:

www.cnaturenet.org

How to get your kids outdoors

Getting involved in the outdoors is not as difficult as some people might think. Here is a list of resources for parents and their children who are interested in outdoor, nature and environmental programs:

Crissy Field Center: links.sfgate.com/ZBGW or call the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy at (415) 561-3000.

Save the Bay Watershed Education Programs: (510) 452-9261, www.savesfbay.org

Point Reyes National Seashore: (415) 464-5137, www.ptreyes.org

PRBO Conservation Science (Point Reyes Bird Observatory): (707) 781-2555, www.prbo.org/cms/40

Miwok Archaeological Preserve of Marin: Sylvia Thalman at (415) 479-3281, www.mapom.org

Marin Agricultural Land Trust: (415) 663-1158, www.malt.org

Trust for Public Land: (415) 495-4014 or 5660, www.tpl.org

Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council: www.stewardshipcouncil.org

Sierra Club Building Bridges to the Outdoors project: (415) 977-5500, links.sfgate.com/ZBHC

The Yosemite Institute: (415) 332-5776, www.yni.org/yi

The Bay Institute: (415) 506-0150, links.sfgate.com/ZBHE

Headlands Institute: (415) 332-5771, www.yni.org/hi

YMCA Outdoor and Conference Center: (415) 331-9622, www.pointbonitaymca.org

Vida Verde Nature Education: (650) 726-9210, www.vveducation.org

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