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California organizes to connect youth with nature

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Keeping the 240-acres of land surrounding Kennedy Meadows "just how it is" was the most Video games have become more exciting than outdoor play and the consequences of inactivity are dire: obesity, asthma, onset adult diabetes, are all on the rise in today's youth. Unfortunately, it is not enough to tell kids to "go outside!" like our parents did.

Healthy youth are becoming an endangered species in California. The typical teen comes home, flings down the backpack and turns on the video game, while basketballs, skateboards and fishing poles gather dust. Our children are avoiding parks and playgrounds in record numbers. Today, fewer than 2 in 10 kids walk or bike to school, and the proportion of kids hiking, walking, fishing or playing outdoors is declining. A recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project that revealed that 97 percent of kids play video games on a regular basis. Providing today's youth with more viable outdoor spaces to play in, and quality programs to guide them, is a necessity if we have any hope of growing healthy and productive adults.

To address this nature deficit, the California Biodiversity Council is focusing its efforts on reconnecting youth to the outdoors. When it meets this week, it will adopt the California Children Outdoors Bill of Rights that lists 10 outdoor activities that every child should experience before age 14. How can we expect our youth to value open space if they have never set foot in one? How can we expect our citizens to understand where their food comes from without getting their hands dirty planting gardens? California's economy and our quality of life are dependent on the abundance of our natural resources. Will our children value them if they have not been outdoors?

Ashley Allen, a Bayview resident, had never spent the night in the wilderness, played in the snow or splashed in the ocean until she became involved with Seven Tepees, a comprehensive youth development organization in San Francisco. Now a junior at UC Santa Cruz, she has created an outreach program to attract promising inner city youth to the university. Allen credits her success to her exposure to nature. She tells her students, "You guys gotta turn off your TV and go outside."

But it is not enough to go outside as a child. If we want the effect to continue through adulthood, we have to keep exposing our youth to the outdoors so that it becomes a fundamental piece of who they are. The smells, the touch and feel of the world around them complements everything they learn in books, and is a critical antidote to what they experience behind the keyboard or joystick. No one sits behind a computer screen for inspiration. The outdoors is a place where the soul soars and young minds start to envision what might be possible for themselves and for the world beyond them. This is the future California needs and deserves.

Steve Hagler is the director of youth investment for the Pacific Forest & Watershed Lands Stewardship Council in San Mateo (www.stewardshipcouncil.org). Diane Dodge is the executive director of the Seven Tepees Youth Program (www.7tepees.org). The Stewardship Council has partnered with the California Biodiversity Council to convene a meeting this week where more than 40 federal, state and local governments that manage California's biodiversity will develop plans for the future.