

"Children and Nature" Conference Tackles Youth Disconnection from Out-of-Doors

What has been described as "nature-deficit disorder" by futurist and author Richard Louv formed the starting point for America's most comprehensive look at the growing disconnect between children and the environment at the "Children and Nature" conference that opened September 8 in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. The conference is being hosted by The Conservation Fund and the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to bring together the nation's top conservationists, educators, physicians, homebuilders, and others for answers to warning signs in youngsters summarized by journalist Louv in his recent bestseller, "Last Child in the Woods/Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder." The gathering drew nearly 350 experts to the campus of the Fish and Wildlife Service's National Conservation Training Center; it will continue through Saturday, September 9.

"The nation's children brought us to Shepherdstown," said Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne. "This is a call to arms—to mothers' arms, to fathers' arms, to the arms of all of us." In his opening welcome Friday morning, the Interior Secretary cited disturbing trends in children's health, obesity, longevity, and participation in hunting, fishing, and camping—symptomatic of what some in conservation and teaching believe is a growing emphasis in American society on indoor activities and a sedentary lifestyle for children.

Louv reported the virtual disappearance in Western culture, over the past 20 years, of unsupervised outdoor play by children, in part because of the fear of crime and child abductions, abetted by an overreporting of such incidents by the electronic news media. Louv also cited the diminishing opportunities for young people to enjoy woods and streams because of suburban development. "We may be the last generation to have a memory of a 'free-range' childhood," Louv warned, citing his own experience playing in the woods of suburban Kansas City. "Those woods are in my heart today. I go to those woods sometimes, even though today they aren't there."

The conference was due to hear from additional experts today and Saturday, including Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall; John Flicker, president of the National Audubon Society; National Geographic Society explorer Dr. Sylvia Earle, and Gina McCarthy, commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, about that state's "No Child Left Inside" campaign.