

Attraction to the natural world often begins in early childhood

by Theodore N. Bailey

I have always wondered when my colleagues in the fields of wildlife biology and conservation and natural science in general first become attracted to the natural world. Most careers dedicated to conservation are certainly not launched for financial reasons because our careers are not among the most monetarily lucrative compared to many others. Neither is it for power or prestige, as these are attributes seldom associated with careers dedicated to conservation or to the natural sciences.

Because of my inquisitiveness, I often asked colleagues how they first became interested in the natural world. Most recalled early childhood experiences outdoors with family members. One, who acknowledged that his father was then too busy earning a livelihood to spend much time with him, traced his attraction to the outdoors to the time he spent, often fishing, with his grandfather. Another colleague from a large city in the Midwest fondly remembered annual family camping trips “out West” to Yellowstone National Park and other scenic western and wild places. Still another recalled her love of the outdoors began while horseback riding as a child through nearby fields and forests.

Although unaware of it at the time, these early childhood experiences later played an important role in their decisions to embark on a career that led them outdoors devoting their lives to conserve, protect, and preserve creatures of nature or wild and pristine places. It is not by mere chance that such important impressions are formed in early childhood. The reason authors Gary Nabhan and Stephen Trimble wrote *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places* was because “we are concerned about how few children now grow up incorporating plants, animals, and places in their sense of home.”

Their argument is, “As children, we need time to wander, to be outside, to nibble on icicles and watch ants, to build with dirt and sticks in a hollow of the earth, to lie back and contemplate clouds and chickadees.” Their studies indicated that contact with even common wild creatures has become rare for most American children. One reason is the places where

most people live. Today, only about 21 percent of Americans live in rural areas and only 1 percent live on farms. Today, surveys indicate most children’s exposure to nature comes from the media—primarily television—instead of hands-on experiences with their parents or elders. Exposing children to nature also has to occur at an early age before peer and social pressures and hormones take over. Usually those early childhood experiences in nature last throughout life.

In an essay in the August 16, 2004 issue of *Newsweek* magazine entitled *Save the Elephants: Don’t Buy Ivory Soap*, Katie Johnson Slivovsky argued that burdening kids with issues they can’t understand creates confusion, not future earth caretakers. She said what influenced her most in choosing a career was not hearing alarming news about the environment but was “the fun she had playing in the woods as a kid.” She concluded that the best way to make children future caretakers of the natural world was to instill in them a love of nature and earth-friendly conservation practices such as recycling.

And in an excerpt of the book *Curious Minds: How a Child Becomes a Scientist* that appeared in the September 2004 issue of *Natural History* magazine, one of the world’s most esteemed biologists and author, Lynn Margulis, recalled that her interest in science and the natural world began early from about the age of five. To avoid her parent’s squabbles after they moved to Chicago, she would lie in a small patch of grass sandwiched between the traffic-ridden South Shore Drive and a cracked concrete sidewalk in front of their house and study ants and sow bugs hidden under rocks. Later, as a scientist, she advanced the now widely accepted view that the tiny organelles (mitochondria and plastids) within in all living complex cells, including the trillions of cells composing our own bodies and those of other life forms, were once free-living bacteria that at some point became incorporated into our cells.

My attraction to the natural world also began at an early age. I was fortunate to have been born and raised in a rural landscape surrounded by forests, abandoned

fields, pastures, marshes, streams, oxbows and a small creek. As a child I carefully explored each landscape and came to know many of its creatures. Catching frogs, tadpoles, turtles, cicadas and butterflies and picking blackberries first with a guardian—my older “tomboy” sister—and then alone consumed my summers. In the fall, my mother gathered hickory nuts and walnuts with us; my father showed me mushrooms that were edible and which to avoid.

My earliest memories are of fishing with my father along the nearby creek. Only a five-minute walk from our home we fished with bamboo “poles” and a can of worms, had the entire creek bank to ourselves, and sometimes returned with bullheads or a rock bass for supper. In the spring we were surrounded by flowers—bluebells, trilliums, trout lilies and spring beauties—and in the fall by falling red and yellow leaves of oak and hickory trees and the scolding of squirrels. But what I vividly recall was not catching fish but the serenity, time spent with my father, the singing of birds, and watching wild creatures secretively making their way along the creek bank beside us. Those early experiences taught me to be observant, quiet, and patient.

My wife Mary, also from a rural area, and I took our young children on hikes, camping and fishing, experiences they still recall as adults. Young children do not need to experience grand vistas or landscapes with moose, bears, and wolves to appreciate the natural world. A friend of mine once told me he was

disappointed while spending time outdoors with his young daughters because they had not seen a moose or other large creature. He was disappointed until he noticed that instead they were focused on plants and small creatures he had failed to notice himself. Children identify best with small creatures that often escape the notice of adults.

Regarding educating children, author Gary Nabhan observed, “a good teacher or nature guide can nurture such incipient naturalists, but they can seldom create them from scratch.” So, to all parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who enjoy and value our natural world and want the next generation to care for our planet, take young children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews outdoors often, take them exploring, hiking, camping, hunting and fishing. The nearby Kenai National Wildlife Refuge offers many opportunities for these activities. And let children safely explore the vacant lot next door or across the street for ants and flowers and make secret “hiding places” among bushes and trees. You may be instilling in them an appreciation for the natural world that may eventually influence their future and the future of our planet.

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