

News

ENVIRONMENT

Addressing a nature deficit

Nature center could help put environment back in education

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There's a new worry for parents and teachers in this digital age: nature-deficit disorder.

The lack of outdoor education inhibits creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving and the exercise that prevents chronic health problems, national environmental educators say.

Even in the Salem area, students spend more time indoors, hooked to electronic gadgets and responding to their world rather than constructing it, according to anecdotal evidence by teachers, parents and environmental educators.

But a recent \$1.35 million bequest to Salem Audubon Society has launched the small nonprofit into just the organization to help reverse the trend.

Getting kids outside

Salem Audubon Society, founded in 1969, first was a birding club and has grown to be an environmental education organization.

Salem Audubon Society members travel to local schools to teach children how to build a nest box, how to identify birds, the role of sea otters in the ocean ecosystem and more.

But when longtime audubon member Mark Gehlar left the society a donation in his will, the 1,600-member nonprofit had the opportunity to expand its education role in Salem.

The way? By building an easy-to-access nature center.

The society has its sights set on a sliver of land on the former Boise Cascade site. The area is next to the Eco-earth globe in Salem's Riverfront Park.

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It's the perfect location because a proposed footbridge across the Willamette Slough would connect the nature center with 22 acres of Salem Audubon Society property, said Sue Johnston, executive director of Salem Audubon Society.

"To have a really successful nature center, you need a diversity of habitats," said David Harrison, a Salem Audubon Society board member. "This area is centrally located, it would have the footbridge to Minto Island and it would have access to acres and acres of public land along the waterfront."

A decision about whether the center could be located on the Boise Cascade site is at least six months away, said Tim Gerling, who is a project manager with the group developing the property.

Another possibility is locating the center in Riverfront Park. Either way, the land needs to be donated or at bargain prices.

"Our chief obstacle is getting a piece of property," said board member Harrison. "So we are trying to build public support ... because we see it as a nature center for the entire community."

Nature deficit

Forest Ridge Elementary School teacher Laurie Aguirre has been teaching in Oregon for 24 years.

She has a unique program at Forest Ridge that focuses on the environment. But even though she provides many outdoor and nature-based experiences, her students are less in tune with the outdoors than they used to be.

"I have found children over the past decade becoming neurologically different," Aguirre said. "They are great at responding — like what you do to a video screen. But I am not finding them very creative or constructive. They are not constructing their world, they are responding to it."

The consequences of keeping children indoors are serious, says Richard Louv, author of the book "Last Child in the Woods."

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"Yes, there are risks outside our homes," Louv said in testimony to the Interior and Environmental Subcommittee of the House of Representatives. "But there are also risks in raising children under virtual protective house arrest: threats to their independent judgement and value of place, to their ability to feel awe and wonder, to their sense of stewardship for the Earth — and, most immediately, threats to their psychological and physical health."

He argues that spending time outdoors has positive effects on test scores in science, math, social studies and other subjects, as well as disabilities such as attention-deficit disorder.

One study in California found that students in outdoor science programs improved their science testing scores by 27 percent, he said.

Kids these days spend, on average, six and a half hours every day plugged into electronic media, according to the No Child Left Inside Coalition.

"Environmental education teaches critical thinking, observation skills, how to analyze and process data," said Linda Rhoads, executive director of the Environmental Education Association of Oregon. "It is not just memorizing content."

Federal legislation to address the growing "nature deficit" — the No Child Left Inside Act — passed the U.S. House this summer.

"The goal of the federal No Child Left Inside Act is to make environmental education an integral component of education so it won't be an add-on for teachers, it will be more accessible and easier for teachers to do," said Rhoads. "We want to make it institutionalized within the school system."

Without a focus on environmental education, teachers have too many obstacles to making time.

In the Salem-Keizer School District, there is a lack of buses.

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"We can't leave before 9:15 a.m. and we have to be back by 2:15 p.m. because there are not enough buses in the fleet," Aguirre said. "I'd love to take kids to the Tillamook Forest, for example, but I can't get there in the hours I am restricted to."

National environmental educators say the federal No Child Left Behind Act has put so much emphasis on test scores that environmental education has been squeezed out of the curriculum.

Oregon legislators are expected to introduce a bill similar to the federal No Child Left Inside Act next session.