



Students planted Monterey pines as part of a field trip to Strawberry Canyon this month, a cooperative venture between Greenspace and Santa Lucia Middle School.

CAMBRIAN: OPINION

Encouraging youths to explore the great outdoors

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This weekend, I joined several [Greenspace](#) volunteers to spruce up Pocahontas Park and Community Garden at Wilton and Burton. Mare's tails clouds drifted overhead, the sun was warm, bees buzzed (along with weed whackers), the soil was soft from recent rains. A glorious day to spend time outdoors.

It made me realize that I, the director of a land trust, hadn't been outside for more than an hour in three weeks. We live in one of the most beautiful places on this green earth, in a temperate climate, with access to forest trails, creeks, beaches and pleasant neighborhoods. How many of us take time to even sit in the sun each day?

Adults have the excuse of work or of declining physical abilities as we age, but what about the rising generation? A recent article in [The Guardian](#) reported that two-thirds of Britain's young people spend less time outdoors than the country's prisoners. A new poll by the Nature Conservancy shows that, while most children in the United States interact with electronic communications every day, a large percentage do not spend time outdoors on a daily basis.

Among children who don't get out in nature, the poll found that primary reasons include physical discomfort such as heat and bugs, lack of transportation to natural areas and an absence of open space close to home.

A fourth reason seems to be increasing youth obesity. Obesity correlates negatively with the amount of time spent outdoors and interest in participating in nature-related activities. However, research by the Wildland and Wetlands Trust demonstrates that just one day exploring in a natural environment reverses children's lack of interest. (<http://bit.ly/1ZHcDxC>).

In 2005, Richard Louv published his groundbreaking work, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*. The book started an ongoing conversation about children and the natural world, about what we are all losing if we do not connect in vital ways with the non-manmade environment around us.

Louv argues that nature deficit disorder is the behavioral and health outcome of “the proliferation of electronic communications; poor urban planning and disappearing open space; increased street traffic; diminished importance of the natural world in public and private education; and parental fear magnified by news and entertainment media” (www.childrenandnature.org). While not an illness or diagnostic label, nature-deficit disorder impacts both children and adults in many ways — less independent and creative play activity, deficits in focus, attention and memory, sedentary behaviors and weight gain leading to lifestyle-related diseases, and increasing emotional and social problems.

Counteracting nature-deficit disorder is difficult in urban areas, especially low-income neighborhoods without parks and safe trails for biking and walking. In Cambria, we're fortunate to have nature at our front doors. Still, there are access challenges for local children and for adults, as well.

Watershed education

One of Greenspace's primary missions is to help link people with nature, introducing our watershed and its wonders to locals and visitors of all ages. We hold a speakers series each year, which features experts presenting information designed to help us connect more closely with geology, botany, forest ecology, marine and watershed creatures, and the beauty and health of both our local watersheds and our global environment.

For children, we now provide a four-season, watershed field education program that dovetails with Santa Lucia Middle School's sixth-grade ecology classes. With science teacher Danielle Narzisi, community volunteers and experts in agriculture, creek and

riparian systems, forest ecology and marine biology, the students spend a day in up-close interactions with nature's complexity and beauty. The children test soils and creek water quality, examine bugs and tree rings, learn local history and plant propagation, listen to nature's noises and get happily muddy and tired.

They leave behind cell phones and iPads, and use all their senses to connect with their place. The local watersheds, after all, are their home. If they don't know their home, they won't have that grounding that will give stability to the rest of their lives. They won't know where they are from, and that displacement also fuels modern dilemmas and unease.

Greenspace offers opportunities to get out and revel in nature. Coming up, on April 9, Dr. David Chipping, professor emeritus of geology at Cal Poly and Conservation Chair of the California Native Plant Society, will lead a walk at Arroyo de la Cruz north of Piedras Blancas, describing wildflowers of the area and explaining several geological formations. The \$45 cost includes a tasty boxed lunch from Indigo Moon. Call 927-2866 or email connie@greenspacecambria.org by Thursday, April 7, for reservations or more information.

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