

**Testimony of  
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Committee on Natural Resources  
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and  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands  
on  
No Child Left Inside: Reconnecting Kids with the Outdoors**

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Madam Chairwoman and Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before your subcommittees today to discuss efforts to reconnect children with the outdoors. Secretary Kempthorne has highlighted the significance of this issue and its relevance to the Department of the Interior's mission. Connecting children with the outdoors can affect their health, enhance their knowledge of our environment, and strengthen their commitment to environmental stewardship. We affirm these goals - and the role the Department plays in advancing them.

In the mid-1800s, there was a young boy who lived in New York City. He was smart and inquisitive but was always sick and suffered terribly from asthma. Few medicines were available to ease his discomfort. He would treat his condition by spending time outdoors. He learned to ride a horse, to fish, to hunt, to take long hikes, and his health improved dramatically. As a young man, he went to live on a ranch in North Dakota, where he saw elk, bison, and deer for the first time. That boy was Theodore Roosevelt; he became our 26th President. He later remarked, "I never would have been President if it had not been for my experiences in North Dakota." His passion for experiencing the outdoors continued throughout his life, and during his Presidency, he established 5 National Parks, 18 National Monuments, and 150 National Forests as well as 51 Federal Bird Reservations and 4 National Game Preserves, which together served as the foundation for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

In 1956, in an article entitled, *Help Your Child To Wonder*, a woman shares her efforts to give her nephew first-hand experiences with nature. She wrote, "[a] child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement....I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*." That woman was Rachel Carson, a wildlife biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and notable author. The 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of her birth is just three days from today.

In 2005, in an influential book entitled, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv writes, “[t]he postmodern notion that reality is only a construct—that we are what we program—suggests limitless human possibilities; but as the young spend less and less of their lives in natural surroundings, their senses narrow, physiologically and psychologically, and this reduces the richness of human experience....[r]educing that deficit—healing the broken bond between our young and nature—is in our self-interest, not only because aesthetics or justice demands it, but also because our mental, physical, and spiritual health depends upon it.”

Many people, especially young people, have become separated from the power of the great outdoors to renew and revive the human spirit. Children are spending more and more of their time inside on the computer, playing video games, or watching television. Studies have shown that the incidences of obesity in children have risen markedly in the last decade. With a click of a mouse, children can use the internet to access the content of libraries and the resources of the universities around the world. They can read all there is to know about a buffalo. They can see a picture of a giant redwood. They can even listen to recordings of the humpback whale. While this knowledge is important and can enrich a child’s life, it is no substitute for feeling and experiencing and immersing oneself in nature – touching a pinecone, watching ants march into an anthill, listening to a river cascade down the rocks, or smelling a forest after it has rained.

In September 2006, the Secretary invited more than 300 educators, health professionals, business leaders, and conservationists to participate in a National Dialogue on Children and Nature. The inaugural conference focused on the positive impact nature can have on the health, conservation awareness, and character development of children, the positive and negative impact of technology, media, and the built environment on children’s connection to nature, and what can be done to restore the connection between children and the outdoors. At the conference, the Secretary stated, “We are here today to light a fire of passion that opens the doors to the great outdoors so that children can see, hear, smell, taste and touch nature. Government can be a catalyst, an encourager, a motivator and a provider of great places for children to have fun, to exercise, and to love the outdoors.”

The Department is uniquely positioned to be such a catalyst. Our agencies manage 501 million acres of our nation’s special places – one in every five acres of the Nation. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages 3,500 recreation sites under its multiple use mission. The National Park Service (NPS) cares for 391 units, some of which include our nation’s most unique natural, cultural, and historical places. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) manages 547 refuges, including 2,500 miles of land and water trails, with an emphasis on six activities consistent with its mission of protecting wildlife and its habitat: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, nature photography, environmental education and interpretation. Each agency has a distinct mission; together, the agencies offer children an endless array of recreational and educational opportunities in a myriad of natural settings.

We have two formidable tools: a land base and passionate professionals with interest and expertise about the natural world. The Department participates in thousands of programs that encourage kids to reconnect with nature, from interagency nation-wide year-round programs that can impact large numbers of children to special local events that target a limited population of youth. Some programs focus on introducing children to an outdoor experience, while other programs seek to provide a more immersive educational experience for the children. Our agencies are creative - making the ways that we can engage children and appeal to the different interests and backgrounds of children limitless. Together, we can discover, rediscover, and get lost in our America. We have made a great start, but much more can and should be done.

### **Interagency Efforts**

The agencies participate in a number of interagency programs and public-private partnerships that seek to connect children and youth to the natural world. For example:

***The Hands on the Land (HOL) Program*** is a national network of field classrooms designed to connect students, teachers, and parents to their public lands and waterways. HOL programs involve students in hands-on activities designed to support the teaching of the required curricula. Programs at HOL sites range from sensory-awareness hikes to long-term monitoring projects. For example, in Oregon, the Cascade Streamwatch program at BLM's Wildwood Recreation Site provides students from underserved schools with an opportunity to experience nature firsthand by donning waders and life vests to monitor the Salmon River.

***The Wonderful Outdoor World (WOW) Program***, currently operates in six states, including right here in our Nation's Capital, introduces urban youth, ages 8-12, to the great outdoors through overnight camping trips, typically at sites right in their community. WOW helps the children learn about basic camping skills, investigate an urban ecosystem, and participate in a community service activity all while getting needed outdoor physical activity and having fun.

***The Youth Conservation Corps (YCC)*** and ***the Student Conservation Association (SCA)*** provide high school teens and college-age young adults with opportunities to work on resource management and education projects. The programs expose them to natural settings, teach them the values of service, stewardship, and conservation of natural resources, and potentially inspire a future generation of land stewards. Over the past 50 years, our partnership with SCA has allowed us to work with approximately 40,000 young people. For example, FWS and BLM each worked with about 100 SCA students in 2006.

***President Bush's HealthierUS Initiative*** is aimed at increasing personal fitness. In 2002, a number of Federal agencies, including the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the purpose of promoting the uses and benefits of the nation's public lands and waters to enhance the mental and physical well-being of Americans of all ages.

### **The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

FWS is connecting children with nature through activities that are consistent with its mission. The National Dialogue on Children in Nature resulted in a service-wide focus on engaging children called, *Children and Nature – Better Together*. This effort refocuses existing activities and initiates new activities that encourage the direct interaction of children with nature. FWS will expand youth fishing and hunting programs, develop junior naturalist and junior birder programs, and make special efforts to improve access to natural areas in urban settings. FWS will create programs that appeal to today's youth, such as incorporating technology into an outdoor experience.

FWS will continue to create *Schoolyard Habitats* across the country. Each region will initiate at least one school yard habitat program in 2007. FWS will work with the schools and provide the expertise on native plantings and creation of habitats that attract wildlife. Since virtually all children congregate and spend a significant time at school, these efforts will bring outdoor experiences right to the children's front door.

FWS also will continue to cultivate existing programs. For example, *the Junior Duck Stamp Conservation and Design Program*, a dynamic, active, art and science program, teaches students in kindergarten through high school about wetlands habitat and waterfowl conservation, scientific and wildlife observation principles, and how to communicate what they learned through the Junior Duck Stamp art contest. Another program, *the Nature of Learning*, is a community conservation education program that emphasizes field experiences and student stewardship projects. One example is the Prairie Science Class at the Prairie Wetlands Learning Center in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. This class is the result of a partnership between FWS and the local school district to use real world, field-based learning experiences in the prairie wetlands ecosystem to engage fifth-grade students in science, math, and writing. The FWS is exploring similar place-based, experiential programs across the country. FWS estimates that, since 2003, nearly 60,000 students and about 2,300 teachers have benefited from the *Nature of Learning* program.

### **The National Park Service**

One of the Secretary's highest priorities is *the National Parks Centennial Initiative*. The Centennial Initiative, included in the President's FY 2008 Budget, proposes up to \$3 billion in new funds for the national park system over the next ten years. An increase of \$100 million plus another \$100 million in mandatory funds that will match philanthropic contributions up to a \$100 million will help engage all Americans in preserving our heritage, history and natural resources through philanthropy and partnerships, with a special emphasis on linking children to nature. The 2008 increase includes \$13 million to be used to hire one thousand additional seasonal naturalist and education rangers.

Through the Centennial Initiative, NPS proposes to expand the *Junior Ranger Program*, which will receive an addition \$1 million in funding under the Centennial Initiative, which gives young people meaningful experience in their national parks. It drew approximately 401,115 participants at 290 park units in 2006. The *Parks as Classrooms*

*Programs* provide resource-based activities for people of all ages in park units as well as offsite, at schools and community centers. In 2006, this program was offered in nearly every one of NPS's park units and attracted 1.8 million children and youth, ages 5 to 18 years old. NPS also has Research Institutes and Field Schools that allow more in-depth educational opportunities for small groups in natural and historic settings.

### **The Bureau of Land Management**

Consistent with its multiple use mission, BLM lands offer traditional dispersed recreation uses, such as hunting, camping, fishing, hiking, boating, and horseback riding, as well as non-traditional activities such as rock crawling, base-jumping, hang-gliding, and geo-caching. With many of the cities in the West growing toward its borders, BLM lands are increasingly becoming the backyards of urban children.

An estimated 3 million children participate in BLM programs that seek to reconnect families and children with nature. BLM recently established a campaign, ***Take It Outside: Connect with Your Public Lands***, which proposes to expand existing programs under an overarching initiative. ***Take it Outside: Connect with Your Public Lands*** seeks to increase the number of children who participate in the programs in three key ways:

- 1) Through their families, because outdoor recreation and volunteer activities can help families realize significant health benefits through improved physical conditioning and strengthening of family bonds;
- 2) Through their schools, because educating children in outdoor settings is a proven technique for improving student test scores and motivation, enhancing understanding of natural processes, and promoting attitudes of respect and responsibilities; and
- 3) Through their youth groups, or organizations, because engaging children in nature through structured youth activities helps to foster a stewardship ethic, promotes good physical and mental health, and prompts interest in natural and cultural resource careers.

This campaign includes ***the Junior Explorers program***, outdoor environmental education programs, interpretive programs, ***the Student Educational Employment Program (SEEP)***, ***Urban Tree House (UTH)***, ***Kids Fishing Day***, and ***the Great Backyard Bird Count***, and outdoor classroom programs, as well as other environmental education and interpretive programs.

### **Other Efforts**

Other agencies, including the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the Minerals Management Service, the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, also provide opportunities to link children to nature:

- BOR sponsors over 20 *Catch a Special Thrill* or C.A.S.T. events each year. C.A.S.T. for Kids Foundation, formed in 1991, joins volunteers who love to fish with disabled and disadvantaged children for a day of fishing outdoors.
- In St. Petersburg, Florida, USGS participates in *the Little Marine Explorers Program*, which teaches children ages 5 to 7 about science through activities that include catching and identifying fish, looking at sediment cores, and learning about animal habitats.

### **Conclusion**

Together, we can help families and children become healthier and live fuller lives by reigniting America's passion for the outdoors. We can offer children opportunities by providing parks, trails, camping sites, and nature programs for children. We can work together to conserve and restore our land and make it accessible to urban and under-served children and others who would not normally venture outdoors. We can raise the next generation of conservationists – inspire the children of today to grow up to be the land stewards of tomorrow and to ensure that they will care about and care for our nation's special places.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this compelling issue, and I will be happy to answer any questions that the subcommittees may have.