

Testimony of Richard J. Dolesh  
Director of Public Policy, National Recreation and Park Association

Joint Oversight Hearing of the  
House Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife & Oceans  
and  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests & Public Lands  
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*"No Child Left Inside: Reconnecting Kids with the Outdoors."*

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Madame Chairman, and members of the subcommittees. My name is Richard Dolesh and I am the Director of Public Policy for the National Recreation and Park Association. I am pleased to present testimony on the subject of reconnecting kids with nature and the outdoors.

By way of background, I worked for 30 years in parks, recreation, and conservation, beginning in 1972 for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and then from 1999 to 2002 for the State of Maryland Department of Natural Resources. I began my career as a park naturalist and came to manage natural area parks and develop nature interpretation facilities and programs for the public. I have had extensive experience working with children and youth as well as park visitors of all ages in nature-based programs, nature education facilities, and natural area parks.

Since 2002, I have been employed by the National Recreation and Park Association, first as a Senior Policy Associate, and since 2005, as the Director of Public Policy.

NRPA is a national non-profit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to advancing parks, recreation, and conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life for all people. NRPA's network of more than 20,000 citizen and professional members represents public parks and recreation at all levels. NRPA encourages the promotion of healthy lifestyles, recreation opportunities for all Americans, and the conservation of our nation's natural and cultural resources.

Connecting children to nature and the outdoors always has been a core mission of public parks and recreation. However, it has become evident in recent years that both children and their parents have begun to lose touch with nature and the outdoors. In fact, this trend is reaching crisis proportions among some age groups, and the fears that a generation of kids is losing touch with the essential values and rewards that nature and outdoor recreation bring. This trend is of great concern to the members of the National Recreation and Park Association.

I would like to offer a few observations from my personal experiences and from knowledge gained from colleagues working in parks and recreation across the country. I would also like to offer some comments on what we at NRPA see as the vital role that the federal government can and should play in bringing solutions to this urgent challenge. Finally, I would like to offer some comments about what public parks and recreation at the local, regional, and state level can do to contribute solutions, for it

is in close to home parks that kids have the greatest opportunity to reconnect with nature and the outdoors. Many ask, what can the federal government do and what can Congress do to help reverse this disturbing trend?

It is abundantly clear that the federal government has an essential and continuing role to play in connecting kids to nature. Our extensive system of federal public lands and the many interpretive services and educational opportunities in our national parks, forests, and other federal public lands constitutes the best system of parks, facilities, and programs in the world. Based on a long history and tradition of interpretive programs and services, park rangers and naturalists have become iconic figures in American history in the ways that they have connected families and children to nature and natural history over nearly one hundred years of service. They have communicated not just the facts of natural science, but a love of nature and a philosophy of stewardship that has built knowledge and a love of nature in generations of those who share in the experience.

As the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Park System approaches, it is entirely fitting that funding and resources are in place to welcome visitors to learn and enjoy our magnificent national parks.

However, how many kids can go to a national park and participate in a nature hike or a ranger-led campfire program? While this can be a transforming experience for children and adults alike, there really are very few who are able to participate in such activities. There are millions of kids who are becoming disconnected with nature who will not have the opportunity for a national park experience.

NRPA is attempting to gain an overview of just what local and regional park and recreation agencies are doing to provide close to home places for kids and adults to connect with nature and the outdoors. At the initiative of two of our professional branches, the National Society for Park Resources (NSPR) and the American Park and Recreation Society (APRS), NRPA recently sent out a survey to about 1900 public park and recreation agencies to learn what programs and facilities the public sector is providing to connect kids to nature and the outdoors. The survey questions focused primarily on what type of nature-based programs, parks, and facilities these agencies had, if any, and what opportunities they offered to the public to connect with nature.

Approximately 250 agencies responded, and while the data is still being analyzed, there are some highlights to share from those agencies that responded:

- 68% of public park and recreation agencies provide nature programs for the public, but nearly one third have appeared to have no nature programs.
- Of the public park and recreation agencies that do provide nature programs, naturalist led nature hikes are largest type of nature program, offered by 82% of agencies, but 69% had nature arts and crafts activities, 63% had fishing related activities, and 63% had nature based summer camps or day camps.
- The most successful nature based programs by agency measures were nature-based education programs in cooperation with local schools, followed by nature based summer camps

- 61% of the public park and recreation agencies surveyed had nature-based parks and facilities such as nature centers, outdoor classrooms, or self-guided nature trails. However, nearly 40% of the public park and recreation agencies responding had no nature-based parks or facilities.
- Over 74% of public park and recreation agencies utilized public/private partnerships for nature activities, and 53% had partnerships in managing and operating facilities
- 91% of agencies that were not offering nature based programs declared they would do so if adequate funding were available for staff. 80% of agencies are interested in opening new nature based facilities if funds were available.

Some of these preliminary findings are surprising. That one third of public park and recreation agencies offer no nature based programs at all show there could be significant gaps in opportunities for parents and children to connect with nature through close to home park and recreation nature-based programs.

Of equal concern is that nearly 40% of responding public park and recreation agencies said that they have no dedicated nature parks or facilities. If these results prove to be true for a larger sample of public park and recreation agencies, this is a signal for concern.

However, there is good news from public park and recreation agencies as well. While this survey is admittedly only a snapshot from a fraction of the total number of public park and recreation agencies in the nation, we learned that these 250 agencies alone had more than 1.3 million children under age 13 who participated in nature-based programs in 2006, and their programs also served more than 170,000 teenagers. And even if 40% of the 250 responding agencies have no dedicated nature parks, the remaining agencies protect more than 350,000 acres of public park land devoted primarily to nature

At the heart of the challenge to connect kids to nature and the outdoors is a connection to parks and public lands. Children must be able to have safe access to parks and public lands, and the importance of such a connection to the land cannot be overstated. We have come to see that having close-to-home access to nature in parks and outdoor recreation areas is vital to kids' establishing and maintaining a lifelong connection to nature and the outdoors.

The effort to reconnect kids to nature and the outdoors is a difficult one, and the challenges must not be minimized. We must continue to ask ourselves, how do we get a generation of kids interested in nature when their parents may not have any interest, or worse, may be fearful of turning their children loose to go exploring in fields and forests and wetlands like we used to.

In fact, in discussions with nature facility and program managers, I have found them to be quite perplexed on how to deal with this perception of safety issue. Many think that it is far safer for kids to play in natural areas than to be on the streets or perhaps even to be cruising websites, but the perception of a lack of safety can create fear. I jokingly suggested that perhaps we need 'dogparks for kids' where parents can turn

their kids loose to turn over rocks in streams and go exploring and feel completely at ease about their safety.

There is significant and important role that the federal government plays in enabling kids to connect with nature. The federal government, through the federal land managing agencies provides matching grants and technical assistance programs to state and local governments. These matching federal grant programs are vitally important to achieving the goal of connecting children and families to nature and the outdoors because they enable literally thousands of local communities to build parks, develop greenways and trails, conserve open spaces, and protect wildlife habitat—interesting natural places that kids and their parents can visit and get in touch with nature.

This is why the technical assistance programs and matching federal investments made in partnership with states and local communities are so important to the effort to connect kids with the outdoors.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is a perfect example. Both the federal side of LWCF and the state side of LWCF enable the purchase of public lands that will be open to the public for recreation, and best of all, in perpetuity. I will concentrate most of my comments on the state side of the LWCF since it has such an impact on helping communities and localities connect kids to the outdoors. And even though my comments about the federal side of LWCF are limited, this part of the program is extremely important to our national public lands since it enables purchase of additions to National Parks, National Forests, National Wildlife Refuges, and other federal public lands.

By way of brief overview, since the beginning of the LWCF program, the state side of the program has aided almost 41,000 local and state park, recreation, and conservation projects. Almost \$4 billion dollars in matching funds have been provided. These “matching” federal grants are often matched at a much higher rate than 50% since the local and state agencies provide much more in in-kind resources and local funding. Project sponsors commit to keeping the lands and facilities open to the public and available for public use in perpetuity.

The LWCF is the one federal program targeted to conservation and recreation that protects lands and waters and makes them available to the public in perpetuity.

Just to give you an idea of what good the LWCF accomplishes in allowing kids to connect to nature, in just the last seven years, since FY 2000, the LWCF state assistance grants have funded over 3,300 state and local projects with over a half billion dollars in matching assistance. Note that in the past seven years, the states and localities have provided more than one half billion of their locally generated funds to match the federal investment.

Of the 3300 facilities and public lands projects that have been aided in the last seven years, over 800 have included purchase of land or the development of trails. While some might be part of larger parks, 238 projects had campgrounds; 192 had fishing facilities; 21 had public hunting lands; 267 were for natural area parks; and nearly 1000 had facilities for family picnicking.

Just to give you a few examples of LWCF projects that enable kids to connect to nature and the outdoors, some of which are in your home districts, here is a partial list of recent LWCF projects:

#### **State of Washington**

##### **Bainbridge Island - Gazzam Lake acquisition- WA**

LWCF project assisting in the acquisition of ~50 acres in addition to ~300 acres existing. The acquired parcel will provide an important trail connection for people accessing the park from the south, allowing better pedestrian connectivity. This park protects important forests and wetlands and will also eventually provide a trail linkage to the Puget Sound.

##### **City of Poulsbo - Liberty Bay Park - WA**

LWCF project provided assistance for a new seawall, and a new waterfront trail, as well as lighting and benches, etc. It was recently inspected by a state member who concluded that the city did a beautiful job in providing waterfront access. The trail also connects with another LWCF site.

Two excellent projects are pending in Bremerton, WA. One is the acquisition of a parcel that will expand the existing Evergreen Park, an urban waterfront park. The other is a park development project at Blueberry Park that will result in a small paved loop trail primarily for children on tricycles and small bikes and additional improvements planned such as restroom and field improvements. This park is within walking distance of a school.

#### **State of Oregon**

##### **Bezell Memorial Forest Development -- Benton County, OR**

Project funds are being used to construct a recreational and interpretative infrastructure in Bezell Memorial Forest, a forest-conservation zone resource near Corvallis, Oregon. The project will complete the site's trail loop system, install interpretive signs, construct bridges for pedestrian creek crossings, construct two open forest observation shelters, and remove invasive species along creek riparian areas.

##### **Clearwater/Vinyard Park Acquisition -- Willamalane Park and Recreation District, OR**

Project funds were used to acquire a 17.6-acre addition to Clearwater Park. in Springfield, Oregon. It provides surrounding residents public access to the Springfield Millrace and Willamette River. Possible future site development includes pedestrian, bicycle and equestrian trails; picnic facilities, and interpretative signs and kiosks.

#### **State of Maryland**

**Chesapeake Bay Conservation Easement & Land Acquisition - Centreville, MD**

Total Cost - \$4,180,000, LWCF Assistance - \$1,250,000

This project is a Federal, State and County (Queen Anne's) partnership that acquired 312+ acres of farmland previously known as the Riggs farm in the Town of Centreville. This property will be used for multiple recreation purposes that include active and passive outdoor recreation development, preservation of wildlife and water quality areas and a demonstration farm. Activities will be developed to meet a wide variety of recreational needs for children, youth, adults and senior citizens.

**State of New Jersey**

**Hoboken Waterfront Park - NJ**

Total Cost - \$3,026,840, LWCF Assistance - \$1,513,420

This project acquired 2.03+ acres of prime property near the waterfront along the Hudson River with views of Mid-Manhattan in a densely populated area in the City of Hoboken and Weehawken Township. The city plans to link this property with Hoboken Cove Park (across the street) with a pedestrian walkway beneath Park Avenue. The city also intends to develop active and passive recreation amenities including walkways, benches, lighting, and landscaping. The proposed development will provide children, youth, adults and senior citizens with neighborhood recreational opportunities that are close-to-home.

**State of New York**

**Roe Park, Highland Falls, NY**

Total Cost - \$500,000, LWCF Assistance - \$250,000

LWCF assistance will help renovate Roe Park, a 9.45+ acre facility in the Village of Highland Falls. The park is being rehabilitated due to safety concerns and overuse of existing facilities. Proposed work includes improvements to the picnic area, sports and playfields, pond renovation and support facilities. Once the proposed development is completed, children, youths, adults and senior citizens will enjoy a safer and more user friendly park recreation experience.

**State of West Virginia**

**April Dawn Park, Huntington, WV**

Total Cost - \$519,840, LWCF Assistance - \$259,920

The Greater Huntington Parks and Recreation District used LWCF assistance to create this unique playground for children that has a play structure of a fictitious monster "Teays Valley Monster" that is the first water playground structure in West Virginia. One section contains the face and spray apparatus of the monster, the middle section contains play forms that comprise the body, and lastly, the monster's tail contains a sand mystery dig section for children to explore and use their imagination. This play apparatus has become the

center piece of this one acre park that is enjoyed by children and youth as adults and senior citizen watch in amazement. The park also has a picnic shelter, comfort station, gazebo, open play area, benches, and walkways.

#### **State of North Carolina**

##### **Azalea Park, City of Asheville**

LWCF Development assistance at this 150 acre park includes picnic areas, fishing facilities, trails, and support facilities. This site provides activities for a variety of interest and age groups. Three new pedestrian bridges will also be developed in future development phases.

#### **State of Florida**

##### **Dreher Park, City of West Palm Beach**

Dreher Park, which totals about 100 acres, first received L&WCF assistance in 1976 for site preparation, water and sewer system, irrigation, roads, parking areas, landscaping, picnic facilities, restrooms and other support facilities. The most recent project provided assistance to install 3 new playgrounds, a freshwater fishing pier, and 2 new miles of nature trails at this urban park site. In addition, three existing picnic facilities and the restroom facilities were renovated. Located in a well developed residential area in the southeastern quadrant of the City of West Palm Beach, this park is one of the last remaining parcels of open space bordering I-95 within the City limits. Dreher Park is a unique environmental experience and features different ecosystems, native plantings and freshwater habitat.

#### **State of Louisiana**

##### **Brechtel, Sam Bonart and Village De L'est Playgrounds New Orleans**

Brechtel Park, which totals 122 acres, is located adjacent to a residential area and while many of its users walk to the park, it is considered a regional park and its users come from the general population of the City. The park has several nature trails, picnic facilities, natural areas, a lagoon, tent pad camping, an exercise trail for the physically challenged and a playground. Bonart Park is also located adjacent to a residential area. In addition, it is bordered on one side by an elementary school and is heavily used by its students. Village De L'Est Park is located adjacent to a residential area and is also bordered on one side by an elementary school. L&WCF assistance was used to replace deteriorated playground equipment at all of these parks.

#### **State of Minnesota**

##### **City of Baxter - Mississippi River**

Total project costs: \$1,200,000; Federal share: \$ 260,123

In this Land and Water Conservation Fund project, the Trust for Public Land will convey 63 acres overlooking the Mississippi River to the city of Baxter for the creation of a new natural resource-based regional park. This site will serve

one of the fastest growing areas of Minnesota, enhance public access to the Mississippi River, and complement an existing state park, state trail, city canoe landing, and nationally significant river corridor.

#### **State of Oklahoma**

##### **Boley Historical Pond, Boley, OK**

Total project costs: \$26,352; Federal share: \$13,176

The town of Boley (Oklahoma) will utilize this L&WCF grant to create a 1.5-acre recreational fishing pond at the Boley Historical Park. Boley received a previous L&WCF grant for the development of picnic areas and a concession/restroom facility at this same park. Located in Okfuskee County, 67 miles east of Oklahoma City, Boley is nationally significant historically because it is representative of the many towns established by African Americans who migrated from the south to northern and western communities after the abolishment of slavery.

#### **State of Texas**

##### **Penitas Park and Wildlife Refuge, City of Penitas, TX**

Total project costs: \$845,440; Federal share: \$422,720

The city of Penitas, in Hildago County, Texas will utilize a \$422,720 Land and Water Conservation Fund grant to assist in the acquisition and development of the 37.5-acre Penitas Park and Wildlife Refuge. This NPS grant, awarded to the city of Penitas through the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, will help the city develop a number of outdoor recreational facilities to include picnic areas, a playground, a natural area with a nature trail, an exercise trail, a fishing pier, shuffleboard courts and horseshoe pits, an exercise garden, a pavilion, and a visitors station. The refuge portion of the project is especially important because it contains native brush habitat as well as a wetlands area. The refuge is situated in a major flyway for migratory birds.

##### **Fort Bend County Regional Park and Trail, Ft. Bend, TX**

Total project costs: \$1,000,000; Federal share: \$500,000

Fort Bend County, Texas, will utilize a \$500,000 Land and Water Conservation Fund grant to assist in the acquisition and development of Regional Park and Trail. This NPS grant, awarded to Fort Bend County through the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, will help the county develop a number of outdoor recreational facilities which include picnic areas, a playground, a baseball/softball field, a soccer field, a natural area with a nature/hike trail, and a canoe launch site. Some of the donated 19.2 acres will become a dedicated wetland.

##### **Montgomery County Spring Creek Greenway, Montgomery County, TX**

Total project costs: \$2,000,000; Federal share: \$1,000,000



Montgomery County (Texas) will acquire and develop 407 acres of land along Spring Creek. Spring Creek is the boundary between Montgomery County and Harris County. Spring Creek Greenway straddles the two counties, with access and facilities on both sides of the creek. Montgomery County and Harris County have an interlocal agreement to participate and administer the lands and facilities in this grant application.

Both Montgomery and Harris County plan to preserve, through donations, purchases, or conservation easements, 33 linear miles of forest along Spring Creek. Larger forested preserves, known as gateway parks, will eventually be connected by a forested "trunk line trail." One of the existing gateway parks, John Pundt Park, will also be developed under this L&WCF grant including new picnic areas, a playground, a canoe landing, a natural area with a nature trail, hike/bike/horse trails, a pavilion, trail access routes, and a restroom facility.

This Spring Creek Greenway project will connect and protect over 800 acres of forest, on both sides of the creek, in order to preserve, protect, restore, and educate the public about an ecological gem - a biologically diverse ecosystem that provides important habitat for many wildlife species just north of Houston.

**Hays County San Marcos Springs Conservation Park, Hays County, TX**  
Total project costs: \$800,000; Federal share: \$400,000

Hays County, Texas, will utilize a \$400,000 Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grant to assist in the development of the 250.7 acre San Marcos Springs Conservation Park. This NPS grant, will help the county create a new park and develop a number of outdoor recreational facilities to include; picnic areas, tent campsites, a natural area with a nature trail, xeriscape garden, amphitheater, wildlife/wetlands observation stations, and a night-time classroom.

**Houston Sims Woods Park, Houston, TX**  
Total project costs: \$800,000; Federal share: \$400,000

The city of Houston, Harris County, Texas will utilize a \$400,000 Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grant to assist in the acquisition and development of 27.3 acres of land at Sims Woods Park. This NPS grant, awarded to the city of Houston through the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, will help the city create a new 75.3 acre park which will include a canoe launch site; a natural area with a nature trail and numerous outdoor teaching/observation stations related to nature/wetlands; and, cultural topics.

This is just a small sample of the hundreds of LWCF projects that have been funded in the past seven years. However, since 2005, the LWCF has not been funded to the level it should be, and NRPA and a host of national, regional, and local conservation and recreation advocacy groups have brought this matter to Congress. In fact, we find it very difficult to understand that in the face of this urgent national challenge that the Administration would propose terminating this extremely valuable and worthwhile program for the past three years. The LWCF state assistance program is proposed for

termination and zero funding in the 2008 budget. We hope that the members of this committee, along with all the members of Congress, see the worth of the Land and Water Conservation Fund and recommend that Congress restore an adequate and appropriate level of funding, at least \$100 million, for 2008.

There are a number of other technical assistance programs and matching federal grant programs that enable local communities to do more to provide nature-based programs, parks, and facilities to families and children that are close to home, safe, and easily accessible.

These programs include the National Park Service's River's Trails and Conservation Assistance program, a technical assistance program that provides planning assistance and coordination among government agencies and private sector entities for greenways, hiker-biker trails, water trails, heritage tourism promotion, and assistance with local projects that connect kids with nature and the outdoors. The \$8.2 million RTCA program budget has suffered a series of cuts in recent years, but is proposed for a \$650,000 increase in 2008. The Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Coalition, a group of national and regional advocacy organizations has called for a \$3.8 million increase in the program budget for 2008 which would restore the program to its 2002 level and enable it to do more projects annually, projects that would undeniably contribute to connecting kids with nature.

Another National Park Service program that assists cities and urban counties rehabilitate deteriorating urban park facilities is the Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Program (UPARR) , authorized under the UPARR Act of 1978. The National Park Service has provided matching federal funds for 1529 urban park projects. However, UPARR has not received funding since 2002, and is in danger of being terminated. Congress must act to revitalize this necessary and important program that enables cities to reach their most at risk and underserved kids to help them reconnect with nature. NRPA along with a number of national organizations has requested that \$30 million be appropriated for UPARR in 2008.

There are many not for profit, educational, philanthropic and conservation organizations that are poised and ready to be partners in this effort. NRPA, for example, is taking several specific initiatives to better connect kids to nature and the outdoors. Our National Partnerships department is coordinating the innovative Teens Outside program with a generous grant from the Outdoor Industry Foundation. The Teens Outside pilot program, first modeled in Asheville, NC, is an eight week outdoor skills and activities program designed to get teens involved through outdoor recreation such as mountain biking, kayaking, hiking, and rock climbing. The hope is that the experiences of the 20 agencies in expanded pilot programs will lead to a nationwide model for other communities and agencies.

Also, NRPA in cooperation with the National Boating and Fishing Foundation (RBFF) is implementing the "2007 Take Me Fishing Community Initiative," a program to encourage development of community based fishing and boating education and appreciation programs. Resources to eligible communities may include grants-in-aid, equipment grants, and scholarships to training workshops, as well as program materials, promotional material and toolkits. This initiative is expected to eventually involve hundreds of communities.

There is much that Congress and the federal agencies can do to address this urgent national crisis. First and foremost should be to commit to providing funds for those matching grant programs and technical assistance programs that can do the most good to connect kids to the outdoors. With your help, local park and recreation agencies are poised and ready to provide safe, close to home places for kids and their parents to explore nature on their own terms.

We will not meet this challenge unless we are prepared to take bold action. This should be a national priority, and you are uniquely positioned to take actions that will meaningfully address the crisis. However, we respectfully point out that it cannot be done at the sacrifice of those programs and services that also needed and doing so much good. It is vital to connect our national public lands and resources to state, regional, and local parks and conservation lands. In this way we can build long-lasting partnerships that go to the heart of every community, and strengthen and support each other in this mission, which will not be accomplished in a year or even a decade. Your help and your leadership is truly needed, and our children yet to come will thank you for it.

*Submitted by:*

Richard J. Dolesh  
Director of Public Policy  
National Recreation and Park Association  
1901 Pennsylvania Ave, NW  
Washington, DC, 20006  
[rdolesh@nrpa.org](mailto:rdolesh@nrpa.org)