

## Will Our Parks Become Obsolescent?

I recently read a quotation in National Geographic, from Jonathan Jarvis, the director of the National Park Service. He said, "Young people are more separated from the natural world than perhaps any generation before them". He went on to say, "The national parks risk obsolescence in the eyes of an increasingly diverse and distracted demographic".

Obsolescence? Our National Parks? Often called "America's best idea"? For those of us who love and cherish our national and state parks and all of our native habitats and the plants and animals in the natural world around us, that is a frightening thought! And this in spite of the fact that a record 307 million visits were made to our parks last year.

But it is not a new or original thought. I have written before about the acclaimed book, "Last Child in the Woods", by Richard Louv, in which he coined the phrase, "Nature Deficit Disorder" to describe the many children who grow up with little of no experience or contact with a native habitat or a natural area.

When shown a beautiful large photo of the Grand Teton National Park taken in evening light to a group of inner-city kids, they described the photo as "scary, empty, forbidding, not welcoming." They asked "Where are all the people?" A group of city kids were taken out to Death Valley to look at the stars they could never see in Los Angeles, but when they got there, they wouldn't get out of the van. They felt threatened by the quiet and darkness!

I don't imagine our Hill Country kids would react in quite the same way, but they might be just as unnerved at the lack of internet connectivity in many parks.

Visitors to the national parks are older and more white than the general population. I don't know if the same applies to our state parks, but I suspect it does. Minorities and the young are just not as interested in visiting parks, for whatever reason. Sally Jewell, secretary of the interior, said they have learned some of the reasons. "We learned...for blacks and Latinos there were cultural barriers to enjoying the outdoors...For the young, in many cases it was about technology.

Here are some of my observations. First, as the years go by, a larger and larger percentage of the population lives in the cities so the kids grow up completely removed from rural life, unlike those of us who grew up in the country. In addition, certainly in the last 20 years or so, electronic gadgets have occupied an increasingly important part of the lives of young people, leaving less time to spend with nature. Finally, it seems to me that school curricula are designed primarily for city schools and much more time is spent teaching more "advanced" topics such as molecular biology, and little or no time teaching about the local native habitats and plants and animals.

The consequences of this, I believe, should be of concern to all of us. It is the young and the growing numbers of minorities who will have to protect and preserve the parks for all future generations. If they feel the condition of the land, rural land, and our parks and natural areas have no connection to the quality of their lives, they will be much less vigilant in their stewardship of them. As the author of the National Geographic article wrote, "A conservation constituency in a newer generation will be needed to protect wild places through the next hundred years."

So what can we do about this? One thing we can do is to make sure every child in our world is exposed to some form of nature outdoors on a regular basis, something that does not involve any electronic screen. We can make an effort to take them to nature centers and natural areas and give them time and space to observe nature even if it is just a bug on a leaf or a flower, or a lizard. Try to steer them to want to go to parks on vacation rather than Disney World or Sea World.

We can provide them with books that help them identify plants or animals. Or, and I hate to say this, but "there are apps for that" as well.

For older kids and young adults, try to get them involved in organizations like nature centers, NPSOT and Master Naturalist meetings, star-gazing parties, etc. Teach them what you know and be a role model. They will thank you for it in the future.

Until next time...

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