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Avoiding “Nature-Deficit Disorder” — It’s About Theology, Not Therapy

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Welcome to summer 2007 and the latest diagnosis of a problem among the younger set — “nature-deficit disorder.” A generation of children is growing up without much contact with nature, or the outdoor world in general.

Leave it to Americans to explain this problem in therapeutic terms. The invention of “nature-deficit disorder” implies that the issue is basically one of psychology and therapy. But, in this case, the problem is kids who have little contact with the outdoor world. The therapeutic intervention is fairly simple — turn off the Nintendo, the television, and the computer and send the kids outdoors.

Two years ago, Richard Louv addressed this problem in his book, *Last Child in the Woods* [see my review [here](#)]. “Our society is teaching young people to avoid direct experience in nature,” Louv explained “That lesson is delivered in schools, families, even organizations devoted to the outdoors, and codified into the legal and regulatory structures of many of our communities.”

More to the point, many parents allow their kids to stay indoors all day, with what precious free time many kids enjoy devoted to digital entertainment and electronic appliances. A generation of boys now knows more about video games than the local woods. Both girls and boys seem perplexed when confronted with nature and many know the outdoors only through participation in athletic or sporting activities on courts or playing fields. They never wander in the woods or sit by a creek watching tadpoles. What they know of nature they get from the Discovery Channel.

Today, a report in *The Guardian* [London] indicates that British children are experiencing the same alienation from nature. Stephen Moss writes:

Nowadays, not only has children’s time become more pressured, but they are also expected to use it constructively: every pastime must have a purpose. But if everything in a child’s life is organised, interactive and based on supervised “experiences”, then there isn’t much room left for spontaneous, unmediated activities such as fishing for tiddlers, building a den or simply mooching around aimlessly on the nearest bit of waste ground.

As Moss explains, “We have therefore severely restricted our children’s access to the natural world, with serious consequences for their health and wellbeing.”

There is a great loss here, and not just to a child’s sense of wellbeing or knowledge of nature. Christians celebrate the fact that God created the cosmos as a display of His glory. A child who experiences the sense of wonder in the face of creation is learning, not only about nature, but about the glory of God.

Put simply, the child is not going to have that experience while sitting in front of a digital screen. No video game can replace the wonder of a mountain sunset, a cascading river, or a spider’s web covered with morning dew. As the Psalmist declared, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” [[Psalm 19:1](#)].

In the closing chapters of the Book of Job, God speaks to Job about His Lordship over all the earth. The Creator

exults in goats, donkeys, wild oxen, ostriches, and hawks. The Creator expresses His good pleasure in the fact that the “majestic snorting” of the horse is terrifying and in the eagle’s ability to set its nest so far above the ground.

Children (and adults) who have no contact with the outdoor world are robbed of devotional knowledge, not just of natural interests.

The secular world increasingly sees “nature-deficit disorder” as a therapeutic problem. Christians should see it as a theological problem. Don’t let the summer pass without spending some serious time in the natural world — and teach your kids to see the supernatural meaning of nature all around them.

After warning against letting kids sit for hours in front of the television screen, let me suggest a couple of resources that are more than worthy of your time with the kids. Both of these series will captivate both children and adults, and the impression they leave is amazing. Christian parents can use both of these series to start great conversations with their children and to reach a deeper understanding of the glory of God in creation.

Blue Planet is an incredible BBC series that takes viewers into amazing underwater worlds most human beings will never see. *Planet Earth*, also a project of the BBC, does the same for the entire planet. Together, these two series redefine nature documentaries. Both offer great opportunities for parents to teach and explain the significance of creation to their children.

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