

**“Last Child in the Smokies”**  
**Sutton Bacon, CEO, Nantahala Outdoor Center**

In the not-so-distant past, kids ruled the country’s woods, fields, and forests – building secret forts and tree houses, hunting frogs and fish, and playing hide-and-seek behind tall grasses. But in the past thirty years, we have radically changed the way we raise our children and altered our attitudes toward nature and the outdoors. Children of the digital age have become increasingly alienated from the natural world with disturbing implications, not only for their physical fitness, but also for their long-term mental and spiritual health.

And, of course, for the sustainability of our environment, since today’s children are the future stewards of our forests and parks. Young people who grow up without spending time in nature are much less likely to be strong champions of the environment when they reach voting age, thereby jeopardizing the land and water legacy that we as a nation have spent the past 200 years conserving. We will have people determining the future and planning the fate of our forests and streams who have never been in them. At no other time in our history have so many children been so separated from direct experiences in nature.

Richard Louv’s book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, reveals why children need direct experience with nature and includes new research that shows the necessity of direct experience in nature to healthy development. As Louv articulates, sensationalist media coverage and concerned parents have scared children out of the woods and fields. The freedom to explore and improvise has been reduced dramatically, as the area in which children are free to roam has shrunk by 89% in 20 years. While visits to our national parks grew steadily from the 1930s until 1987, peaking at an average of 1.2 visits a person per year, by 2003, the number of people visiting those parks dropped by 25%.

Just as intimacy with nature is waning, a growing body of evidence shows that obesity, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression and diabetes in children are also on the rise. The number of children and adolescents now considered overweight or obese has reached 17 million. Six out of every ten overweight children already have at least one risk factor for heart disease. And, a study of 5- and 6-year-olds showed that children in the United States gain up to three times as much weight during summer vacation as they do while in school.

The Nantahala Outdoor Center has long been on the leading edge of delivering affordable and healthy outdoor experiences to youth and underprivileged populations. In fact, NOC takes over 80,000 children under the age of 18 on outdoor experiences annually, as many participants as both Outward Bound and NOLS combined. We supply each child with an environmentally-enlightening and life-altering outdoor experience on public lands.

Building on our heritage of youth service and environmental education, NOC is establishing a non-profit organization, The NOC Foundation, to help tomorrow’s outdoor enthusiasts and conservation stewards reflect the diversity of America and have better access to these healthy, human-powered outdoor activities. Our presentation will discuss our passion for reconnecting children with nature along with specific examples of how our 35 years of experience can be applied in any public, private, or non-profit organization wishing to accept the challenge of making a difference for our most precious resources – children and the environment.

As Richard Louv writes: “Developers and environmentalists, corporate CEOs and college professors, rock stars and ranchers may agree on little else, but they agree on this: no one among us wants to be a member of the last generation to pass on to its children the joy of playing outside in nature.”