

Mother Nature Bats Last

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I am now sitting in a small grove of redwoods, writing this article with pen and paper about how we don't spend enough time in nature and I am looking at my watch so that I can finish in time to get back to my office and send the article in to meet the deadline. What's wrong with this picture?

We live in a time and place where our connection to the natural world is at an all time low. Our circadian cycles, which are based on the sun, are thrown off by artificial light and schedules that ignore the sun. Our senses are diminished by the smaller ranges of colors and sounds, tastes and sensations we now encounter in a man-made world, rather than those that are found in nature. Our sense of pace or rhythm has been sped up with the advent of time measurement down to seconds. How many of us would put up with dial up Internet speeds after having tasted high-speed connections? We travel multiple time zones, we work night shifts, we work shifts period. We eat by the clock, we wake up by the clock, and we consume synthetic and genetically modified substances. We expose ourselves to EMFs via electrical wiring, wireless technology, cell phones, TV, radio and microwaves. We even dose ourselves with X-rays, and low-grade radioactivity.

In addition to this we consume exaggerated amounts of what nature used to provide in limited doses, especially sugars and animal based foods. The average American is a walking cocktail of medications, both prescribed and over the counter, and other synthetic substances, and we wonder why we have chronic health problems?

Our distancing from nature has also come with a storyline that we, as a culture, believe in. The story is that science and technology will provide the solutions to our problems, including our on going battle with the natural world. The only problem is that we are killing ourselves and all other life forms on the planet. As individuals and as communities, we have lost our way by distancing ourselves from where we came, nature. If only we could have just kept the modern plumbing, access to clean drinking water, safe food storage technology and Netflix, we could leave all the rest and be much better off.

Richard Louv, in his book, *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, coins the term "nature deficit disorder." According to the book, "Nature-deficit disorder is not a formal diagnosis, but a way to describe the psychological, physical and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature, particularly for children in their vulnerable developing years."

Louv's book describes the effects of children spending more time inside, and less time in unstructured activity outside. He relates this phenomenon directly to loss in physical health, primarily in obesity, and diabetes, mental health, attention deficit disorders, anxiety and depression, and loss of interest, or caring, for our natural world. Movements, such as Waldorf education and organizations, such as The No Child Left Inside Coalition, are acutely aware of the situation and are actively working to remedy the situation.

Jerry Mander's *In the Absence of the Sacred - The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*, describes a study by Marshall Sahlin, a University of Chicago professor, who studied hunter gatherers and other tribal people, who found that counter to popular wisdom, traditional people, especially hunter gatherers, spent about four hours/day working for their sustenance; food, shelter, clothing etc. and had the rest of the day off! We in the modern world work much harder than our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Mander quotes Sahlin, "a good case can be made that hunters and gatherers work less than we do; and, rather than a continuous travail, the food quest is intermittent, leisure is abundant, and there is a greater amount of sleep in the daytime per capita per year than in any other condition of society."

Sahlin was preceded by Frederick McCarthy and Margaret McArthur who studied aboriginal communities in 1960. They also found about a 4-hour/day of economic activity. This leaves plenty of time for socializing, play, music, naps, eating and general leisure. Another study of the Dobe Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa, found that the workday was closer to two hours and this was done by about two-thirds of the population. These communities would share the work. Those that gathered and secured food shared it with the others, then the roles switched. The work of one was split by many, providing more leisure time for everyone.

There is a parable making the rounds in the self help movement that goes like this:

A man is casually fishing when a businessman approaches and encourages him to get more ambitious. He advises him to catch more fish and sell the surplus in market then invest in a boat, catch even more, invest the profit from those sales into more boats and hire more help. "Why would I want to do that?" asks the fisherman. "Eventually you can sell the business, retire and do what you want," says the businessman. "I am doing what I want right now," replies the fisherman.

"Natural" is a word that Americans seem to have a bipolar relationship with. It is used to sell products that ironically are not natural at all, by claiming that the ingredients are "natural." When Nature is contrasted with technology, we seem to rely on the promise of science and technology to get us out of the trouble we are in with nature. In the realm of health, Americans wait for cures from incurable conditions to come in the form of a drug or procedure. In this way we have given up our power to have any role in the outcome. We have entrusted our health with large institutions and experts to solve our problems. The individual has become helpless. No wonder as a society we are depressed, alienated and lonely.

The farther we get from nature, the more trouble we find ourselves in. Let's start with the beginning of life; birth itself. The cesarean section rate is going up all over the world. There are many causes for this increase and they are not for the health of the mother or the child. Overall, there is a low priority given to the natural ability for women to give birth. Once a woman submits to a medically managed birth a cascade of factors beyond her control, come into play:

1. The side effects of induction of labor often inhibit natural labor.
2. The attitudes around surgery and medical interventions minimize the harm and exaggerate the benefits. Babies born by cesarean section are more likely to have surgical cuts, breathing problems, difficulty getting breastfeeding going, childhood-onset diabetes, and asthma in childhood and beyond, according to researchers.
3. There are economic and legal incentives that encourage more medical intervention rather than less. The choice to use these interventions favor the provider's needs rather than the patient.

These and other factors contribute to a national c-section rate of over 30%, while the World Health Organization has stated that a rate of 5% to 10% would be optimal for the health of the mother and child.

If we want to raise healthy children, be healthy and happy ourselves and have a sustainable way of life we must turn our trajectory back towards respecting the very environment that sustains and supports us. Please consider the following topics in the context of lack of contact with the natural world:

- Free Play versus organized activity.
- Consumption of processed and or synthetic foods.
- Time spent consuming media/entertainment.
- Choosing synthetic toys and clothes over natural materials.
- Irregular bedtime/sleep hygiene.
- Diminished range of sensory stimulation due to lack of time spent in nature and over stimulation of senses due to over-scheduling, media use and lack of down time.
- Belief in "experts"
- Lack of belief in own direct experience.
- Speed of life.
- Disconnection and disregard for natural world, natural processes.

The documentary, *The Economics of Happiness* by Helena Norberg-Hodge, is a concise explanation of what the state of humanity is now, and how we can proceed forward in a way that is sustainable and beneficial for our communities, our planet and ourselves.

When we reacquaint ourselves with nature we are connecting with ourselves, the people around us, the land, air and water that sustain us, and the plants and animals that we depend upon. As we reacquaint ourselves with nature our health improves, our environment recovers and we are all much happier.

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