

Introduction

*In the end, we will conserve only what we love.
We will love only what we understand. We will
understand only what we are taught.*

—**Baba Dioum, Senegalese poet and environmentalist**

Do you remember playing outside? Maybe you remember leaving home on a summer morning and not returning except for meals until bedtime. You might have fond memories of a favorite outdoor place where you and your friends played and explored. Maybe it was a park, maybe it was a beach or wooded area. Maybe it was nothing but a field of weeds, but it was yours, it was outdoors, and you loved it.

Kids now are much less likely to have such a personal connection with nature. And how could they? Their outdoor time is, generally speaking, sporadic and highly supervised. Recent studies have revealed that:

- 🍃 Children between the ages of 8 and 18 spend an average of 6.5 hours a day staring at electronic screens (television, video games, computers, etc.), leaving little time for outdoor play.

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- ❖ The number of children who participated in outdoor activities such as hiking, walking, and fishing dropped by 50 percent between 1997 and 2003.
- ❖ 80 percent of children under age 2 and more than 60 percent of children ages 2 to 5 lack daily access to outdoor play.
- ❖ Children between the ages of 8 and 11 can identify significantly more artificial Pokemon characters than real, native living things, such as oak trees, sparrows, and otters.

In schools, hours devoted to physical education and recess are down compared to previous generations; and at home, parents are more reluctant than ever to let kids spend time outside unsupervised.

Yet many reasons exist why a connection to nature is crucial for children:

- ❖ **Physical development:** Being connected to nature may keep kids in better shape and help in the fight against obesity. Watch a group of children in a wooded area as they run, jump, and climb over things. They are exercising!
- ❖ **Cognitive development:** Studies show that just being exposed to nature can improve memory,

concentration, and grades. The pace of play in nature is self-regulated and thus can increase attention span and stimulate the senses.

- ❖ **Social development:** Nature reduces stress, soothes the psyche, and eases tensions, paving the way for improved communication and closer bonding with others.
- ❖ **Green development:** Children are responsible for the future of our planet. An early connection to nature leads children to grow up as better stewards of the environment.
- ❖ **Spiritual development:** Nature stirs youngsters to question their place in the world and to wonder at the magnificence of their surroundings. A child's imagination is turned on, an important part of overall development.

The simple fact is that nature is awesome. It's amazing to look at, touch, and listen to. It's wondrous and remarkably self-sufficient.

One thing has improved with time: Modern kids are more likely than previous generations to understand concerns about the environment and their roles in preserving it. Of course that's important. But if

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a child can describe how global warming is affecting our planet but can't remember the last time he explored woods or a beach, he's not likely to genuinely care about nature. According to research conducted at Cornell University, children who spend time in nature before age 11 are much more likely to grow up to be environmentally minded adults than kids who don't.

On a personal note, I gain so much pleasure from being outdoors that I want others to have that experience too. As a mother, I have seen nature's positive, calming effect on my children and their friends, and it worries me that we are getting further away from nature. I know I always feel better when I have spent time outdoors, stepping on the earth. As the poet Terry Tempest Williams wrote, "Nature quiets the mind by engaging with an intelligence larger than our own." Getting out makes common sense, in more ways than one.

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With all this in mind, I searched for a single resource that would provide lots of simple, practical tips to help me get my own children and my students more in touch with nature and help us all become more eco-friendly.

I couldn't find one. That's why I wrote this book. On every page, you'll find straightforward, engaging activities, projects, games, ideas, and tips to help you get yourself and your kids outdoors, improve your physical and spiritual health, and do more for Earth—150 doable ideas, all in one place. Whether you live in the heart of a big city, an outlying suburb, a small village, or a rural area, there is something here for you.

Get Out! is intended for use by parents, grandparents, teachers, counselors, youth leaders, and any other adults who spend time with kids. Maybe you're a stay-at-home dad looking for a few ways to get your toddler outside during the week. Or you're a teacher or youth group leader, and you have a bunch of kids with a whole lot of energy. Or you're a grandparent who wants to share your love of the outdoors with your grandkids. Maybe you're a homeschooler looking to inject some eco-knowledge into your curriculum. Whether you're looking at one child or a big group, most of the ideas in *Get Out!* will work for you. If you read ahead of time and make adjustments for the size and age of your group, the ideas can be used with one kid or 30. When you see the words "your kids," think of the group, small or large, with whom you're sharing these activities.

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You don't have to revamp your lifestyle if you want to connect more with nature and do more for the environment. This book is about finding new, simple, fulfilling ways to do a little extra, to take the next step—wherever it is you currently stand. Take a step now, take another later, and when your kids grow up, *getting out* will be built into their sensibilities.

Get the Best Results

As you prepare to get out with your kids, be careful not to push for too much at once. Especially if a child is reluctant, it's best to choose one or two ideas to start with. Here are some tips to help you succeed:

- 🍃 **Show enthusiasm.** Try to make it fun, and remember a sense of humor! Kids won't embrace a project if it seems like homework or medicine.
- 🍃 **Be curious.** You don't have to know everything about nature in order to engage your kids: learn together. Learn through experience.
- 🍃 **Share your precious nature-based memories.** Most kids love to hear about what grown-ups were like when *they* were kids, so tell about a tree you

loved to climb, a stream you always waded in, or vacations you took.

- 🍃 **Be ready to compromise.** Tell your child that you love the computer (for example) as much as she does, and you can have time for technology and the great outdoors. Make a schedule together for screen time and outdoor time, and do your best to stick to it.
- 🍃 **Finally, be flexible.** If things aren't going the way you planned, adjust. Figure out what *is* working—or what might. Don't have preconceived ideas of what success looks like.

Even with all the ideas here, this book only scratches the surface—like a garden trowel scraping a handful of soil from the earth. You can find a whole planet full of other ways to get out, if only you dig. I'm sure you can come up with lots more! I'd love to hear about them. You can write to me at:

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