



This article was originally published in the July/August 2005 issue of The Interpreter, the journal of the National Association for Interpretation.

Nature-Focused Preschools: Putting the Heart First in Environmental Education

By Ken Finch

If there were a tested, proven method of environmental education that brought the same kids to your nature center or museum for at least three hours per day, for two or more days every week, and for at least nine consecutive months, would you jump at the opportunity? Suppose that the core activity of this approach was gently-guided, open-ended explorations of natural areas, allowing ample time and opportunity for the discovery-based play that goes along with such excursions. Suppose, as well, that it was a near-perfect match with age-appropriate best practices for child development, and that it also got parents involved -- as volunteers and donors -- far beyond other environmental education approaches. Finally, suppose that this method of environmental education could completely pay for itself. Would it matter to you that those kids are only three-to five-years-old, and have no interest in global warming, ozone holes, and sustainable development?

For many years some environmental educators sneered at preschool programming, a "complete waste of time," as one grant reviewer wrote to me some 15 years ago. The typical, cause-driven environmental education practitioner was impatient to teach facts and to reap the behavioral harvest that would result. The rationale was that people would understand ecology and human impacts on the environment, and change their behaviors to live lightly on our planet. There was no time for "bugs and bunnies" classes where the tiny students did not walk away itching to preach their new mantra to politicians, business owners, or their parents. But while knowledge-based environmental education programs were expanding and thriving, a few nature centers were changing kids' lives by operating preschools as a integral part of their missions.



The eternal fun of gardening is one of the extended activities at Schlitz Audubon Nature Center Preschool (Bob Bailie photo)

These preschools should not be confused with the once-per-week or once-per-month "mom and tot" type of programs that are now common in nature centers, nor with the occasional field trip that traditional preschools may make to their local nature center or zoo. Instead, these are licensed, tuition-based preschools with dedicated staff and facilities, year-long classes, a tuition-based approach, and a level of two-way commitment far exceeding other types of nature center programs.

A typical day at a nature center preschool will have kids spend at least an hour outside in all weather conditions. They experience open-ended discovery walks that are guided by their own interests and the natural events of the moment. Some days they might make it to the pond to catch tadpoles and watch the swallows, some days they might follow fox tracks in the snow, and some days they might do nothing but roll down the hill in cushions of autumn leaves.



Poking in the water from the boardwalk at Dodge Nature Center: Can childhood nature play get any better?

When the teachers are good at their craft, these daily excursions have no agenda, no prepared lectures, and no list of birds to identify. Instead, the kids explore and play in a close approximation of the kind of nature experiences that many of us remember from our own childhoods. And we would be wise to remember those experiences thoughtfully!

Multiple research studies have asked adult environmentalists to recall what circumstances in their lives most contributed to their conservation values. These studies have identified a frequent phenomenon: lots of childhood time spent exploring and playing in "wild" spaces. For a city kid, that wild space might have been just a couple of vacant lots where they collected butterflies and dug holes to the center of the earth. For a farm child, it may have been the back forty, complete with a tree house and a campsite. For a lucky young suburban explorer it may have been a nearby park full of natural delights that made each season a new adventure. Whatever the details, frequent, unstructured, and unscheduled "nature play" has been shown to have a lasting impact on people's attitudes about nature.

Nature play does not guarantee that a child will grow up to be an environmentalist, and for some people other influences are more important. But there is little doubt that growing up with nature as a playground has been an important influence for many of

today's dedicated conservationists. Sadly, there is also little doubt that such childhood experiences are an endangered part of growing up. Over-scheduled childhoods, the explosion of indoor electronic play, parental fears of unsupervised outdoor play, an increasingly urbanized population, and a lack of neighborhood green spaces have all combined to make "nature play" a rarity for today's children. Yet if it is a frequently cited influence on developing conservation values, shouldn't the environmental education profession be striving to encourage such play?

That's where nature-focused preschools excel. Their outdoor activities are not a perfect replication of the nature play that so many "Boomers" remember, since the preschool children are always supervised. However, the nature preschool model negates parental fears of letting their child explore outdoors and makes nature play a part of the students' daily routine. The result is a depth of nature experience that is virtually unknown to most nature centers and other environmental education providers. Children enrolled in a nature-focused pre-school for even a single year will probably get more direct contact with the outdoors than they will have in all their subsequent years of K-12 schooling.

Inevitably, the number of kids served in a single nature-focused preschool is small: perhaps 60 to 180 are enrolled, depending upon schedules and the number of classrooms. But the contact hours and depth of experience are both tremendous. As a result, the impacts are much more likely to be lasting ones, when compared to the highly episodic environmental education lessons that most nature centers and natural history museums offer.

"If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the motions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil."

The Sense of Wonder
— Rachel Carson

It is not only the frequency that makes these preschools powerful, though. Research on human development and learning has long established that the early childhood years are a crucial period in the formation of lasting adult values. Could we do any better than to ensure that one of those values is a deep love for the outdoors? We can't turn the clock back to the halcyon "Leave it to Beaver" days, but we can dedicate our efforts to returning frequent nature experiences into childhood. Nature-focused preschools may be the best structured approach for simulating the bond-forming, unstructured childhood explorations of nature that were once so common, but seem problematic.

Nature-focused preschools also offer significant marketing advantages: there is not a community, an ethnic group, or an income level where parents are not looking for quality child-care options. Moreover, they expect to pay for it at market rates. For some,

this will require taking advantage of governmental tuition support or scholarship funds, but the nature center still receives full pay for its services. And in a nature center setting, could there be any warmer, fuzzier fund-raising pitch than to seek endowed scholarship funds that will allow low-income children to attend a nature-focused preschool? Overall, there may be no more financially sound environmental education model: existing nature-focused preschools have demonstrated that they can function as self-funded "cost centers," just as thousands of private preschools do.

Nature-focused preschools also tend to generate strong parental involvement, offering a variety of volunteer roles that combine parental interest in their own children with the community service appeal of environmental education. For a nature center with a preschool, this will typically result in a crossover effect where parents' commitments expand to support the entire organization, be it through regular volunteer work, as financial donors, or even as board members. This level of parental engagement is virtually impossible to match through more typical K-12 environmental education programming.

Despite their advantages, nature center-based preschools are few in number. The most long-standing ones are found in nature centers in New Canaan, Connecticut; Westport, Connecticut; and Kalamazoo, Michigan. New ones are beginning to appear, though. Dodge Nature Center in Minnesota opened a very successful one in 1999, and the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in Milwaukee opened one in 2003 as a wing of a spectacular new 32,000-square-foot facility. Already, Schlitz's director, Buffy Cheek, is calling it the best part of the building, and the community's response has been exceptional.

As the environmental education profession begins to recognize the effectiveness of nature-focused preschools, more such programs will inevitably follow. They promote an age-appropriate environmental education methodology with a core belief that the heart comes before the head. This affective-based approach is a perfect prelude to the more cognitive emphases of most environmental education programming. Nature preschool students will have years of further schooling to learn the facts and concepts behind the creation of a sustainable society, but that learning will be much more likely to endure through their adult lives because it has been layered atop a deep love of the outdoors developed through the childhood joys of nature play.

With careful planning and thoughtful commitment, nature-focused preschools can provide a unique, fiscally viable, and powerful complement to the program repertoires of nature centers and other environmental education providers.