
Parents: *The Play's The Thing!*

For millions of Americans, their best memories of childhood include outdoor play — sometimes on ball fields or sidewalks, but often in little patches of wild land close to home. These play spaces were vacant lots, a few acres of woods, small creeks and wetlands, or even the “back forty” of their family farm.

What these places had in common was this: kids could play in them without being yelled at, or even watched. They could dig holes to China, build rag-tag forts and tree houses, catch garter snakes, search the creeks for crawdads, and curl up in secret spaces for a little daydreaming.

Children playing in these “wild” places never gave a thought to any greater meaning of their play, but research finds important and lasting impacts. It turns out that this “free range” play was great for building kids’ creativity and imaginations, for informally learning a little science, for developing good judgment and self-confidence, and for stimulating their healthy physical development.

For Green Hearts’ conservation mission, though, the real power of “nature play” is that studies have shown it to be the most common influence on the development of conservation values. Importantly, kids’ nature activities with mentors (usually parents) rank a close second on this list of conservation influences. So there’s a natural match to pursue: parents and children exploring nature together!

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Partnership Forming for Children's Nature Center

Green Hearts is excited to be crafting the final details of a public-private partnership which will develop an important new resource for nature-based play: our first “children’s nature center.”

In September the Board of Directors of the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District (NRD) voted to work with Green Hearts on the project, using NRD property located in the Omaha suburb of Papillion. The NRD Board also agreed to commit up to \$60,000 for a master site plan and initial architectural design work.

The 90-acre site, known as Rumsey Station Wetlands, lies along the West Branch of Papillion (Papio) Creek. This property includes wetlands, a small prairie, natural springs, and both floodplain and upland woodlands. The western-most 26 acres — just acquired by the NRD this summer — include a large corn field that will be restored to more wetlands and prairie. Since the NRD acquired its first acres at Rumsey Station in the mid 1990s, the tract has been closed to the public while a good partner was sought to provide direction and protection to the property. Green Hearts is now slated to be that partner.

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The Graying of Green

Conservationists like yours truly are basking in the glow of the recent “green” boom. Suddenly it seems like everything’s going green, from shopping bags to architecture, from carpets to cars, and from light bulbs to skateboards. (Yes, even green skateboards....) It’s wonderful to see all this positive environmental change finally happening!

Yet from the curmudgeonly perspective of one who’d much rather be paddling in the Boundary Waters than leading a neighborhood recycling drive, I have a personal observation that is gradually evolving into a real concern: ***The green boom doesn’t seem to include much greenery!***

For the past year I’ve been privileged to listen and learn by the sides of Omaha’s most passionate green advocates — my colleagues on the Board of the Green Omaha Coalition (GOC). They are remarkably well-informed about new green products and innovations, and especially about green initiatives in architecture and engineering. Yet through this learning I’ve come to realize how much of the current green “explosion” is about energy, housewares, and architectural design. In fact, today’s ecology “buzz” seems to be less about the green of actual nature, and more about the gray of concrete and steel.

This concern of mine doesn’t reflect on the GOC Board, which is doing great work. In truth, I see the same phenomena everywhere: the green boom seems to be stressing new products and materials, rather than nature *per se*. Countless news stories extol the legitimate benefits of non-toxic cleaners, CFLs, high-mileage cars, bamboo flooring, and buildings that are finally being designed with common sense (which we now call “green”). My problem is, I don’t think the essence of green is *stuff*. I think it’s about *people*. More particularly, people’s core values and beliefs.

Green Hearts’ focus is on conservation’s future, and we believe that the key to that future is personal conservation values. All the great progress in the current green boom, along with all the environmental successes of the past 50 years, are ultimately only as good as how well future generations carry them on. Ecological protection isn’t correlated to the life span of a light bulb, or a car, or even a building. Ecology works in millennia, and the only way to protect it over such an extreme time frame is to make conservation a dominant value of our children, and their children, and all the generations of children to come.

Will we reach this level of personal and societal commitment to conservation through the excitement and delight of 20% fly-ash concrete and low-E windows? I don’t think so. Research tells us that conservation values are most often formed during childhood, through frequent, informal, play-based interactions with actual nature. That is, the kind of green that *grows*, along with all the wonderful bugs, rocks, birds, and adventures that come with it.

Don’t get me wrong: the new green products and processes are great, and have real impact. But if we want a *lasting* culture of conservation, we need to find ways to ensure that all future generations of kids will be able to enjoy “nature play” *frequently* — which, as a practical matter, means close to their homes.

“Green” cannot just be about recycling, rain barrels, straw-bale construction, and pervious concrete. ***Real, lasting green*** will require family neighborhoods replete with native plants and micro-habitats thriving in every nook and cranny. Years of play in these small patches of nature is what will steer generations of children into life-long conservation values. To *really* go green, we must make an extraordinary commitment to ensuring that *nearby nature* is a part of our children’s lives.

Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood

A Nebraska nonprofit organization, incorporated November 2005.
Green Hearts is designated as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt charitable organization by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service.

Mission Statement

Green Hearts’ mission is to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature.

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What Makes Good Nature Play?

The best nature-based, childhood play is unstructured and spontaneous — just as it historically occurred. Today, though, children’s lives are much more controlled and scheduled, parents worry more about their children playing outside without supervision, the hypnotic allure of electronic play is pervasive, and wild spaces suitable for free play are less common in family neighborhoods. As a result, spontaneous nature play is hard to achieve.

To begin to effectively restore such play to childhood, it is important to understand what characteristics make that play most powerful. Based on a review of the research, Green Hearts believes that there are three key aspects of impactful nature play:

- ♥ The right kind of places;
- ♥ The right kind of activities; and
- ♥ The right kind of frequency.

The right kind of places are what author-naturalist Robert Michael Pyle calls “rough ground:” patches of nature that are readily available to kids and that are not tightly controlled or restricted. No great natural preserves are needed, just small places where kids can still dig holes, collect specimens, climb trees, and skip rocks. Ideally these should be places where children can truly play *with* nature, not just *in* it.

The right kind of activities are unplanned, free-form, creative play in natural settings — play that kids make up as they go, and that engages them directly with nature. Adult-guided nature hikes, commercial playground equipment, and school field trips do not fill this need. Rather, it is more about letting children just “muck around” in woods, meadows, or creeks.

The right kind of frequency is the most difficult aspect to achieve. Historically, children’s outside play was almost a daily occurrence. Kids would come home from school, grab a snack, and go outside to play. On Saturdays they’d go out in the morning, with a mandate only to get home “before the street lights come on.” In surveying the origins of conservation values, researcher Louise Chawla noted that the special places where people formed a first bond with the natural world “were always part of the regular rhythm of life.”

That goal — *the regular rhythm of life* — sets a very high bar for nature play — one that may not be realistic for most kids. However, it is vital to recognize its importance. Getting a child to play outdoors once every month or two is no more likely

to have lasting impact than is an adult taking a baby aspirin once per month as a heart medication. Of course, a single and powerful “wow” experience outdoors *may* permanently change a child’s values and perspective; that does occasionally happen. But if you want children to reliably get the full benefits of nature play, it needs to happen frequently — probably at least once or twice per week.



For kids, a “sideways” tree may be better than an upright one!

When we understand these three critical parameters of nature play, we can begin to identify and design child activities that simultaneously reflect all three. Amidst the pressures and restrictions of modern childhood, this will not be easy — but our children will be the better for it!

The Play’s the Thing! (continued from page 1)

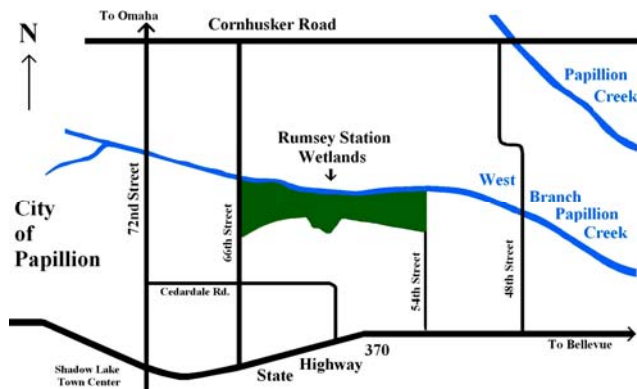
Unfortunately, “nature play” is virtually extinct. American children (ages 3 to 12) now spend 27% of their total time with electronic media, versus only one percent outdoors! And of that one percent, only a portion is unstructured, free-form play — that is, play that is not designed, scheduled, or led by adults. In fact, **American kids now average only 30 minutes per week of unstructured outdoor play!**

Green Hearts is working to “get the word out” about the value of nature play, and helping to spur a rebirth of this timeless childhood joy. Part of our plan is to develop a network of children’s nature centers (*see page 1*), but frequent free play in *your own backyard* is equally important. We offer a few home-based suggestions in this newsletter (*page 5*), and will publish more in future editions. But the first, most crucial task must fall to parents: turn off the TV and video games, and send your children outdoors! They may complain, at first, that they are bored, but soon they will be inventing their own play — and gaining all the developmental benefits that come with it.

Children's Nature Center *(continued from page 1)*

The children's nature center at Rumsey Station Wetlands will be the prototype for Green Hearts' most ambitious goal: development of a multi-state network of such centers. A children's nature center is a new kind of conservation resource — a hybrid of a traditional nature center, a children's museum, and a preschool. Like all nature centers, it will have a dedicated tract of land, a permanent building, professional staff, and a selection of public programs. However, both the landscape and the building will be designed around the special needs and interests of children, as children's museums typically are.

Trails will lead to destinations for discovery and play, such as a bird viewing blind, a lookout tower, a pretend campsite, and quiet little "nooks" equipped with swings or chairs. New "micro-habitats" will be created just for kids, with bird and insect gardens, a small orchard, a "polliwog pond," and a grassy hill for rolling and sledding. Active play will be allowed in many habitat areas, mimicking the kinds of outdoor play and discovery that were once such a common part of childhood, but which are now so rare.



The center's modest building will be designed to respect its natural setting. Included will be two early childhood classrooms that will house a nature-based preschool, plus a large and flexible community room designed to host public programs and events. For general visitors, the building will offer restrooms, information, a bird observation lounge, and simple displays. These will not be fancy museum-type exhibits, but rather will feature ever-changing natural "treasures" that visiting children find on the property and decide to share with other kids, such as a perfect autumn leaf, a shed cicada skin, a strange rock, or a giant grasshopper — the kinds of discoveries that have delighted children for millennia.

The licensed, tuition-based preschool will enroll three- to five-year-old children for a full school year at a time. Parents will choose either morning or

afternoon sessions, for two to five days per week. Every day — in all safe weather conditions — these lucky preschoolers will go outside to play and explore around the property, under the gentle supervision of professional teachers. Over the course of a year, each child will enjoy hundreds of hours of outdoor play and learning, building their lasting love of nature while uniquely stimulating their social, emotional, physical and intellectual development. Active, well-balanced preschool experiences like this are a perfect fit for the early childhood years, and form a very strong foundation for school readiness.



While children will be the center's focus, the trails and features at Rumsey Station Wetlands will be open to all ages, throughout the year. School field-trip programs will not normally be offered, though, since research has not found these to be a very effective conservation strategy. Instead, we will offer a variety of weekend, after-school, evening, and summertime programs for local families — always retaining Green Hearts' emphasis on young children and nature-based play, and open to the entire community. Included among these will be summer nature day camps for ages three to ten. Local community organizations will also be able to use the building for meetings and special events.

Once the final agreement is in place, Green Hearts and the NRD will work with the Big Muddy Workshop landscape design firm and local architects to develop the site and building plans, along with initial cost estimates. These designs and expense estimates are crucial prerequisites for a fundraising campaign to create this unique new facility — *the country's first children's nature center*.

"We'll be seeking community support for what is truly an exceptional project," says Green Hearts' President Ken Finch. "But it will be a challenge. A children's nature center is a new idea, Green Hearts is a "start-up" organization, and our national economy is struggling. Nevertheless, I'm optimistic about our eventual fundraising success. It won't be easy, but then, groundbreaking initiatives rarely are."

The success of the future capital campaign will determine the timetable for opening the children's nature center at Rumsey Station Wetlands. Green Hearts can't wait — and amidst the pervasive effects of "nature deficit disorder," neither can our children!

Parent Tips: *Kidscaping Your Yard for Nature Play*

Over eighty percent of Americans now live in metropolitan areas, so most children no longer have a convenient “back forty” to play in. Instead, they usually have to settle for smaller, less-wild places: a couple of vacant lots, a neighborhood park, a little creek and gully. These can be great destinations for nature play! But many parents don’t want their younger children playing without close supervision, except in their own yards.

Thankfully, children don’t need expansive open spaces to make up good play. In fact, a typical urban or suburban yard can be a very good spot for young children to first bond with nature, especially if wise parents enhance it for better nature play. Here are a few easy, low-cost suggestions that could fit into most backyards.

Rough Ground. Create a little patch of wild in your own backyard. Choose a corner or perhaps the area behind a garage, stop mowing and spraying, and let it grow tall. Interesting new plants will soon “move” in, and with them will come an expanded variety of little beasties like pill bugs, beetles, earthworms, fireflies, toads, crickets, and maybe even a garter snake. All of these are time-tested child delights — not to mention the new flowers and seed pods that will also appear!

Digging Pit. This can be a portion of, or an addition to, your rough ground. It is simply a segment of ground — perhaps eight or ten feet square — that you strip of all vegetation. Next dig it up to a depth of a foot or two to loosen up the dirt, and mix in a few fifty pound bags of sand to help it drain better. Then just give your children little shovels and rakes plus a few recycled containers or buckets, and tell them it that is their spot to do whatever they want. You will probably be surprised at what a joy just plain *digging* is for children! And, of course, they will uncover all sorts of treasures. For more fun, be sure there’s a hose nearby, or a water bucket. Mud is magical!

Leaf Piles. Yes, just good ol’ leaf piles — obviously in the autumn. Nowadays many homeowners routinely bag up their fallen leaves and have them hauled away. Don’t do that! Put them into one or two gigantic piles and let your kids have at ‘em. They’ll enjoy it just as much as you undoubtedly did when you were young! When the fun wears off, move the leaves into your planting beds or gardens, where they will decompose into valuable soil nutrients.

Discovery Boards. Find a scrap piece of plywood, two or three feet square; the exact size doesn’t matter. Lay the board flat in a quiet corner of your backyard (or in your rough ground) and leave it there throughout the year. The shade, coolness and moisture under the board will create a micro-habitat that tiny animals love — kid classics like daddy longlegs, worms, millipedes, snails, beetles, slugs, maybe even a mouse nest. Of course, what’s underneath is not as important as the process: Go out with your kid every day or two to take a peek underneath. Before long it will become a favorite routine for your child, full of great child-scale adventure and discoveries.

Supporting Green Hearts

If you believe in Green Hearts’ mission to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature, appreciate the work we are doing, and would like to stay informed about it, please consider supporting us through an annual membership! Every gift will be acknowledged, and — more importantly — every gift will be greatly appreciated!

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Mail this form and your check (made out to Green Hearts) to:

Green Hearts INC, 4502 South 42nd St., Omaha, Nebraska 68107-1059.

Thank you!

Green Hearts' Professional Training

Green Hearts continues to promote the importance of nature play by training fellow professionals around the country. Our recent engagements have included:

- Environmental Education Council of Ohio (annual conference keynote)
- Association for Conservation Information (national conference keynote)
- No Child Left Inside conference at University of Tennessee-Martin (keynote)
- Association of Conservation Executives (workshop in Philadelphia, PA)
- Leave No Child Inside — Central Ohio (annual conference keynote)
- Child Care Resources (New Jersey; annual conference keynote)
- Tennessee Environmental Education Assn. (annual conference keynote)
- Mississippi Environmental Educ. Alliance (conference keynote, coming in Nov. 08).

Our conference presentations focus on the importance of nature play and what can be done to restore it to childhood. This is a serious and thoughtful subject, but Green Hearts President Ken Finch keeps the talks light by illustrating his messages with thematic cartoons.

Green Hearts has also provided recent consulting assistance about the design of nature play spaces to Five Rivers MetroParks (Dayton, OH) and Briar Bush Nature Center (Abington, Pa). We also assisted Pioneer Park Nature Center (Lincoln, NE) with strategic planning advice, and published two articles about nature play safety in *Directions*, the Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators.

We enjoy opportunities to “spread the word” and are always looking for new audiences, so please contact us if your group would like to learn more about nature play: kfinch@greenheartsinc.org or 402-344-8711.



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Bringing Children and Nature Back Together