

Green Hearts

Institute for Nature in Childhood

Nature Preschools: A Promising Direction for Environmental Education

The most distinctive component in Green Hearts' strategic planning is our intent to create a multi-state network of nature preschools. This unique approach to fostering a "culture of conservation" generates a common response from most people: "What's that?"

The basic concept of a nature preschool is quite simple: it's a licensed preschool that is located in a natural area where the students explore, discover, and play daily. Like most preschools, it serves three to five year-old children in half-day sessions. They are registered and pay tuition on a yearly schedule and — depending upon the parents' wishes — attend for two to five days per week, throughout the nine-month school year.

Nature preschools are few but not new; they have existed for at least forty years. Today there are about a dozen in the United States that are operated by nature centers, and numerous others that incorporate some of the same elements. But no organization has developed a network of these extraordinary facilities that would bring their great experiences to young children across the country.

The outdoors is the key to the singular approach of nature preschools. The students go outside every day, exploring their schools' multiple acres of habitats in any weather that isn't actually dangerous. "There's no such thing as bad weather," goes the refrain, "only bad clothing." Nature preschoolers get muddy, wet, warm, cold, tired, covered in leaves and sticky seeds, and most of all, exhilarated. Along the way, they fall in love with nature. With the aid of spare sets of clothes and well-informed parents, the daily nature explorations become a much-loved and memorable part of the students' development. And therein lays the great importance of nature preschools.

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Green Hearts Gains Tax-Exempt Status

In November 2006 the Internal Revenue Service (I.R.S.) approved Green Hearts' application for federal tax-exempt status as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Despite a long, eight-month wait for approval, the I.R.S. ultimately had not one single concern or question about our application.

"This is a vital step for Green Hearts," said Founder Ken Finch. "It allows contributions to Green Hearts to be tax deductible for donors, and the 501(c)(3) designation is a key badge of approval that the philanthropic community looks for. We're proud to have had our application approved so easily."

A huge backlog of tax-exempt applications has kept the I.R.S. busy recently, making Green Hearts' wait longer than expected. Finch gratefully noted the assistance that Green Hearts received from Senator Chuck Hagel's office in tracking the application and keeping the I.R.S. informed of their interest in its processing. "Senator Hagel's State Director, Todd Wiltgen, was very kind to work with us on this," said Finch. "We really appreciated his help."

As is usual for new 501(c)(3) approvals, Green Hearts' tax-exempt status will be provisional until the I.R.S. reviews our operations in three years. However, during this period all gifts to Green Hearts will be fully tax deductible, to the extent allowed by law and by each donor's financial situation.

"...a ditch somewhere – or a creek, meadow, woodlot, or marsh....These are places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down, where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin.
...Everybody has a ditch, or ought to.
For only the ditches and the fields, the woods, the ravines – can teach us to care enough for all the land."

-- Robert Michael Pyle, *The Thunder Tree*

The frequent, relatively unstructured, child-centered outdoor activities of a nature preschool are a near-perfect prescription for two crucial needs: creation of lasting personal bonds with nature, and the healthy development of young children.

Multiple studies have identified frequent childhood free play in natural areas as the greatest influence on the development of adult conservation values. Such play was once a common and cherished part of childhood: building tree houses, digging holes to China, rolling in leaf piles, catching frogs and butterflies, and daydreaming in secret little hideaways. Sadly, such play is now rare. However, “nature play” is still a daily joy in nature preschools, where children can explore and play outdoors under the watchful eyes and gentle facilitation of trained teachers. A child attending a nature preschool for two years will enjoy hundreds of hours of direct contact with nature — most likely more than they will gain in all their subsequent years of education, combined!

While almost perfectly replicating the outdoor play that is so influential on conservation values, nature preschools are also an exceptional fit with the developmental needs of young children. They use a “whole child” focus that rejects an early emphasis on academics in favor of a more balanced philosophy that supports the cognitive, physical, creative, emotional, and social development of children.

Nature preschools offer ideal settings for this goal. Their sensory-rich, constantly changing outdoor environments are treasure troves of experiential learning, inquiry, imagination, and wonder. The children’s daily outdoor adventures combine with nature-themed indoor activities to stimulate a full range of developmental needs. This age-appropriate approach helps the students grow into healthy, inquisitive children who have the self-confidence and practiced social skills needed for school readiness.

Nature preschools also have an unusual strength within the nonprofit sector: they can be financially self-supporting once the facilities are constructed and open. They work on a proven business model, using tuition payments to fund their on-going operations — just as most other types of preschools do. Green Hearts’ future preschools will also offer scholarship funds in order to ensure that our nature preschools can serve families who might not otherwise be able to afford them. Further, our preschool facilities will host a variety of play-based nature activities for young children and their families on weekends and during the summer months.

As a conservation organization, Green Hearts’ ultimate goal is to change the world, to make it a little better place for today and tomorrow. According to Green Hearts President Ken Finch, “The beauty of the preschool model is that it has been shown to create lasting impacts on values and beliefs. That’s our work: generating life-long conservation values that will guide adult conservation behavior.”

Many Thanks . . .

. . . to the people who are helping Green Hearts succeed! Here are a few of them.

Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District staff :	Marcie Oltman
John Winkler, Jim Becic,	Emmett Mullin
Christine Jacobsen, & Brad Mohrmann	Sylvia France
Big Muddy Workshop, Inc.	Todd Wiltgen
Janis Dwyer	Ginny Wallace
Richard Louw	Nancy Hawekotte
	Amy Hill
	ANCA

Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood

*A Nebraska Nonprofit Organization
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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.

We use best practices in child development, environmental education, naturalistic landscaping, and conservation design to help ensure that active nature exploration and play remains a cherished part of childhood.

By nurturing children’s love for the natural world, Green Hearts lays the cornerstone for lasting conservation values among the citizens and leaders of the future.

Board of Directors

President/Founder: Ken Finch (Omaha, NE)
Vice President: Marcie Oltman (Dellwood, MN)
Treasurer: John Royster (Omaha, NE)
Secretary: Peggy Finch (Omaha, NE)
Director: Patti Bailie (Mequon, WI)

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Green Hearts Takes Its Message Far and Wide

Recent months have highlighted Green Hearts' efforts to promote the importance of nature play. In August Green Hearts' Founder Ken Finch led an overflow crowd in discussing nature play at the annual "Summit" of the Association of Nature Center Administrators. September found Ken as an invited delegate at the "National Dialogue on Children and Nature" in West Virginia, followed by his work as a facilitator at October's "Working Forum on Nature Education for Young Children" in Nebraska City.

In November Ken gave the keynote address at the annual conference of the Minnesota Park and Recreation Association, "***Beyond Bogeymen, Hyper-Parenting, and Plugged-in Play: Can We Get Children Back Outside?***" He also led a follow-up workshop at this gathering. Later the same month Ken "keynoted" at the National Master Naturalists Conference in Arizona, presenting "***The Play Imperative: Restoring the Nature of Childhood.***" November also included participation in an "invited dialogue" about the research Clemson Professor Rob Bixler is doing on "environmental socialization" — the influences that steer some children towards an especially deep involvement with nature.

December found Ken back in Minnesota, addressing the annual staff conference of the Trails and Waterways Division of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. Six weeks later he visited the Early Childhood Network Conference of the Minnesota Evangelical Lutheran Education Association, where his keynote was "***Nature Play: The Once and Future Heart of Early Childhood.***" At the same conference, Ken paired with Green Hearts Board member Marcie Oltman to lead a workshop on "***Bringing Nature's Gifts to Your Playground.***"

It has been gratifying to see the universally positive response, from such diverse audiences, to the principals of nature play. This topic seems to strike a chord with Americans from all geographic areas and all walks of life — a receptive response that bodes well for efforts to bring nature play back to childhood!

"Hands-on experience at the critical time, not systematic knowledge, is what counts in the making of a naturalist. Better to be an untutored savage for a while, not to know the names or anatomical detail. Better to spend long stretches of time just searching and dreaming."

— E.O. Wilson, *The Naturalist*

Need a Speaker?

Green Hearts Founder Ken Finch loves to speak to professional conferences and similar events about nature play and its implications for conservation and child development.

Call or email us for details: 402-344-8711, or kfinch@bigmuddyworkshop.com



Upcoming Green Hearts Presentations

A major part of Green Hearts' mission is to advocate for the importance of nature play as a key stage in the development of lasting conservation values. Hence, we're happy to have these springtime opportunities to share the message!

March 12 – 16: A multi-stop speaking tour at three different locations in Pennsylvania, sponsored by the Pennsylvania Association for Environmental Education. Talks will be held at St. Vincent's College, the Pennsylvania College of Technology, and Lehigh University.

May 19: Keynote presentation for the statewide Missouri Master Naturalists conference being held in Columbia.

June 12: Keynote presentation in Dayton, Ohio for the 50th anniversary celebration of the founding of The Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm. Later on the same day, a public presentation about nature play is scheduled at Dayton's Wegerzyn Gardens.

An Ode to Chocolate . . . with Wings

It's Valentine's Day as I write this, and I love all those cacao-based treats as much as anyone. But I write of a very different "chocolate." Spell it with a capital "C", and give it feathers. Twenty years hence, young son Duncan will still remember *this* Chocolate, unlike the candy he'll be wolfing down tonight.

Chocolate is a Red-tailed hawk — most likely a female, judging from her wingspan of over four feet. Such Red-tails are common around here. In fact, local birders sometimes invoke the "Red-tail rule": if you can't positively identify a large hawk, just call it a Red-tail and you'll probably be right.

Chocolate, though, has two unusual qualities. (1) While most Red-tails have whitish breasts and bellies, Chocolate is a beautiful deep brown throughout her body, excepting only the rufous red atop her tail and the grey on her underwings. This "dark morph" color pattern is unusual in Red-tails; it makes her a cinch to identify. (2) She lives in our suburban backyard.

Like all Red-tails, Chocolate likes to perch high and prominently in tall trees, and her favorite such tree is about 120 feet behind our kitchen window. In fact, she's such a regular feature in the tiny green space bordering our house that we greet her almost daily: "Good Morning, Chocolate;" "There's Chocolate;" "How's the hunt going, Chocolate?"

For make no mistake, Chocolate is a predator. We've found furry remains of her prowess on our back lawn, and I've watched her eat an unlucky avian victim while high on her perch, scattering feathers to the wind. To the Finch family, this is all pretty cool.

Apparently it's also "cool" to the birds and squirrels that calmly visit our feeders while Chocolate watches. Although Red-tails will eat those animals, they don't seem worried. Yet when a Cooper's hawk flashes through the scene, those beasties scramble for cover. Chocolate just seems to be an accepted part of the territory — and so she is with us, too. By now, she's almost a part of our extended family.

A related part of our family life is Green Hearts' efforts to bring children and nature back together. That goal can seem pretty daunting amidst the worrisome changes happening to childhood and our growing tendency to think of nature as a place you must drive to. Yet Chocolate reminds me of a simple truth: nature is right outside our windows.

To augment that proximity, there have been plenty of published guides and methods for creating backyard wildlife habitats and other naturalistic home landscapes. Nevertheless, the vast majority of suburban yards remain akin to golf greens: they're manicured to perfection, regularly doused with poisons, and often dressed up with vaporous blooms that better belong in environments halfway around the world.

Caring for these living picture frames around our houses has become a huge industry, ranging from kids with lawnmowers to giant corporations with names that cleverly disguise their work of dispensing toxins. If you need someone to design a perfectly unnatural yard for you, no problem — they're ubiquitous. Need someone to design a "yardscape" for your pooch's pleasure? You can find those too. Need someone to design a natural yard for children? Good luck!

Enter the lesson of Chocolate: it doesn't have to be complicated. In a best case scenario, all homes would border a little piece of wild land, with tall trees for Red-tails, shrub thickets for rabbits and foxes, and endless adventures for our children. Some builders are beginning to understand this, since not only are such residential green spaces great for kids to play in, but they also add market value to housing developments.

But if your family isn't lucky enough to live in such a neighborhood, you can still make a difference — even with a small yard. The catalog of techniques is huge, but you can start with a few simple steps.

- Plant native shrubs, trees, and flowers that are attractive to local wildlife. Any decent nursery can guide you to these and help you with planting.
- Hang up a few bird feeders and birdhouses. The latter make great parent/child craft projects!
- Put a little garden pond in your yard, or just add a basic birdbath and keep the water clean.
- Each spring, turn another piece of your boring lawn into a mulched planting bed for trees and shrubs.
- And stop spraying poison all over your kids' playspace. Why do you think those little warning signs are stuck in your lawn after it's been "treated"?

With just a little effort and a bit of time, your yard can start to look more like a piece of nature than like the ninth green. And with that wilder look will come places for your children to play, food and shelter for wildlife, and maybe — if you're lucky — even a bit of Chocolate.

Can We Design Landscapes for Nature Play?

In brief, yes! Just a generation ago, American kids played in schoolyards and backyards, on streets, and in local natural areas. Wild lands were a particular favorite for millions of children, and there was usually at least one such place within walking or biking range.

Truly, natural areas are the original and greatest playgrounds; they offer endless possibilities for play. They're filled with explorations and challenges; they change virtually every day; they foster creative play with sticks, pine cones, rocks, and anything else that can be picked up; and they bring the surprise and excitement of wild animals, large and tiny. Whether the "back forty" of the family farm, a nearby public park, or just a vacant lot next door, natural spaces provide the perfect recipe for childhood play.

Sadly, today's children have far less access to such sites. Where children *can* still play in public parks, the rules usually prohibit classic nature play like building tree houses, digging holes, catching caterpillars, and swinging on saplings. Home yards are often just as restrictive and even less diverse.

But change is possible. Many park and recreation professionals are considering new approaches to allow more free play in public green spaces, even at the cost of some slight damage to plants or grounds. Once this would have been a radical idea, but the need for restoring "nature play" is gaining support rapidly —

along with the realization that without it, the next generation of adults may care less about conservation, and thus may not form a strong constituency for park protection and funding. Nature centers are also testing outdoor play, with some sites now allowing children to enjoy formerly forbidden joys like digging holes, playing in shallow streams, and even climbing trees.

The last frontier for restoring nature play to the daily lives of children may be the most promising one: home landscapes. Purposeful planting can add much play value to yards, such as fruits to pick and eat, shrub thickets with hiding nooks, plants that attract kid-friendly wildlife, and grassy hills or slopes for rolling, sledding, and playing "king of the hill." Bare patches of soil for digging, sand and water for their enduring attraction, forts and tree houses for dramatic play, and shallow ponds for splashing are other good possibilities — amidst a myriad of choices.

Ken Finch, Green Hearts' President, is writing a book about designing yards for nature play, and hopes to soon find a publisher. In the meanwhile, parents can start re-designing their yards by remembering the types of outdoor activities they cherished during their own childhoods, and then looking for small-scale ways to imitate them. The end result may not look quite like all the other manicured and pristine landscapes in the neighborhood, but it will bring more value to their children's lives. It's tough to top that!

In June Green Hearts will be working with staff from the Five Rivers Metroparks system in Dayton, Ohio, to help plan new "environmental playgrounds" at two of their public parks.

Membership in Green Hearts

"Membership has its privileges," they say. Green Hearts may be an exception. Purchase an annual membership and we'll promise not to send you a flimsy little card to get stuck in your wallet, nor a refrigerator magnet that could damage your psyche by holding up a diet reminder. We *will* keep you up-to-date on our progress with occasional newsletters and emails, and promise to speak well of you to our wild animal friends. Most of all, you will be helping Green Hearts bring children and nature back together. Plus, your membership contribution is tax deductible! Is that cool, or what?!

Name _____ Email _____

Address _____

Membership Categories:

- \$1,000 Founding Member — for *people of distinction* only! This guarantees your name a spot in Green Hearts' eternal annals!
- \$500 Patron Member — make this gift in 2007 *and* 2008, and we'll call you a *really cool* Founding Member, too!
- \$100 Supporting Member — it's too early to contribute this much to a presidential campaign. Send it to us instead.
- \$50 Contributing Member — the perfect gift to honor all of us Boomers who have passed the big 5 - 0
- \$25 Grassroots Member — think of this as a "co-pay" for saving the world. Not a bad deal....

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!

Planting the Seeds for Nature Preschools

Green Hearts is planning for nature preschools – and not just for our own operation, but for other conservation organizations, as well.

This spring, Green Hearts President Ken Finch will be working with the Cincinnati Nature Center (CNC) as they initiate planning for a nature preschool at their main site in Milford, Ohio. Ken will be evaluating their property and building, reviewing their financial plans, and meeting with their Board to discuss the philosophy and value of nature preschools.

Simultaneously, CNC is part of a coalition of five Ohio nature centers that are hoping to hire Green Hearts to help them with similar work. A pending grant, if received, will hire Green Hearts to lead the group in identifying the universal information and processes that all the centers will need to launch nature preschools. If the first grant application is successful, a larger contribution will be sought to move the

collaborative planning into detailed preparations for each individual nature center.

Ken has also been working with staff from the Pennsylvania State Parks system to map out a planning agenda for their interest in nature preschools. They are expecting a summer start for implementation planning for a preschool at Presque Isle State Park in Erie and for a feasibility study for another potential nature preschool at Nolde State Forest in Reading.

Meanwhile, Green Hearts continues to evaluate potential Omaha-area sites for our own first nature preschool. A particularly promising location and organizational partner have been found, and Green Hearts is optimistic that this partnership will blossom. Efforts are underway to secure major funding to support detailed planning and to serve as lead gifts for a capital campaign to construct a state-of-the-art facility. Stay tuned!

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Bringing Children and Nature Back Together