

Green Hearts

Institute for Nature in Childhood

On the Road Again....

One of Green Hearts' three core methods for implementing its mission is educational advocacy: speaking, writing, and otherwise helping to lead public understanding and opinion towards greater support for unstructured childhood play in natural areas. In recent months, interest in this topic has been gaining momentum as more and more Americans grow concerned about the dramatic changes that have occurred to childhood over the past 25 years. Open-ended outdoor play — once such a constant, joyful, and routine part of growing up — is rapidly being supplanted by countless hours of solitary “plugged-in play” as well as a veritable barrage of adult-designed and adult-led activities.

As a conservation organization, Green Hearts' greatest concern about this change is how it will affect our future citizens' environmental values. Nearly 30 years of accumulated research has found that adult conservationists most often attribute their nature commitment to long and frequent hours of free play in natural areas during their childhoods. Yet, ironically, we are coming to understand this crucial connection just as such play is vanishing from childhood. Consequently there is a justifiable sense of urgency in getting this message out — and that's exactly what Green Hearts is trying to do.

This past spring saw Green Hearts' President Ken Finch on a “march across Pennsylvania,” as one local organizer jokingly termed it. Ken presented hour-long, illustrated talks titled *The Play Imperative: Restoring the Nature of Childhood* to appreciative audiences at St. Vincent's College, The Pennsylvania College of Technology, and Lehigh University. Sponsored by the Pennsylvania Association for Environmental Education (PAEE), the three talks generated a feature article in PAEE's membership journal as well as ample local press coverage (“Losing Touch with Nature” blared the section headline in the Easton Express-Times.)

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Dayton Plans for Nature Play

In Dayton, Ohio, Five Rivers MetroParks is taking a bold and innovative direction in its planning for a new park playground. They are eschewing the traditional play structures in favor of more natural features like tree trunks, tunnels, and water features — all of them specifically intended for children's play.

Public park systems depend upon citizen support to ensure they have the necessary funding and political clout to protect and restore natural areas while also providing outdoor recreation opportunities. Hence, savvy park leaders are trying to understand what factors can create that public support. Increasingly they are noting what research says: open-ended, unstructured, and frequent childhood play in wild areas is the most common influence on development of life-long conservation values. Realizing that such “nature play” is no longer common, a few select park systems are beginning to experiment with new approaches to restore that kind of play — and hence to help ensure their future support within the community.

In June, Green Hearts President Ken Finch joined staff from Five Rivers MetroParks and a landscape architect from the firm *Human Nature* in a day-long brainstorming session. The focus was on Dayton's

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Do your children — or your students — get enough time and opportunities to stop and smell the flowers?

Bringing Children and Nature Back Together

Hills and Dales Park, where a new playground is being designed from scratch. At the end of the day the preliminary plans were headed for major changes, as Finch and the staff jointly advocated for more natural play features. Three other parks in the system were also visited and discussed as possible sites for similar “environmental playgrounds.”

Planning for Hills and Dales continues, as the designer seeks to incorporate the group’s suggestions. Some should prove easy to implement, such as more planted “nooks and crannies” for quiet play, using natural lumber and logs in lieu of plastic, and adding more wildlife-attracting plantings. Other ideas will be more challenging, but are still possible: an enticing parents’ lounge, a flowing stream with rocks and pools for play, and a multi-level tree house offering both challenging and all-ability access routes. Green Hearts is delighted to have been able to lend a hand to Five Rivers MetroParks with their new effort to provide opportunities for children’s nature play!

**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.

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.

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A few weeks later Ken was privileged to give the keynote address at the Missouri Master Naturalists Conference. This gathering of 100+ dedicated volunteers and professionals readily related to the impacts of “nature play,” and they recognized it as a vital piece of understanding for their own efforts to assist with natural resources projects around the Show-Me State. In fact, some of them were outright emotional about the message of nature play. Master Naturalist Leslie Limberg wrote,

Wow... Thank you so much for your presentation Saturday night, Ken... Who would have thought I'd need a box of kleenex! You have touched hearts.... your message will resonate a long time....

People’s emotional involvement with nature has always been a powerful tool for the conservation movement, but few facets of it seem to connect with as many individuals as do the fondly recalled joys of playing outdoors, day after day — and often, by parental dictate, “until the streetlights came on.”

That influential message was also an appropriate focus for the 50th anniversary celebration of the Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm in Dayton, Ohio, where Ken also gave the keynote address. On that same June day, Ken spoke to a public audience of about 75 people during an evening presentation at Wegerzyn Gardens, home of a new and wonderfully playful children’s garden.

In the near future for Green Hearts and Ken is a panel presentation about nature preschools at the August *Summit* of the Association of Nature Center Administrators, in Milwaukee, followed by a September keynote address to the annual conference of the Tennessee Environmental Education Association.

Green Hearts is also using the printed word to advance its mission. Recently, Ken authored a two-part article about environmental education for the early childhood years which was published in the newsletter of the Minnesota Association for Environmental Education. Also, two Green Hearts’ articles have appeared this year in *Directions*, the journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators: one reporting on last fall’s landmark *Dialogue on Children and Nature* conference, and the other discussing the many benefits of nature preschools. So Green Hearts’ message about nature play is spreading! If your organization is interested in helping us in this effort, we’d love to hear from you.

Green Hearts Offers New Views on Disadvantaged and At-Risk Children

When children are described as “disadvantaged” or “at risk,” it usually refers to severe challenges and limitations that are caused by poverty, discrimination, poor education, bad parenting, and/or health issues. These are powerful concerns that our society can and must address — and much more effectively than what we’ve managed to date. But today children are also suffering from something new: the increasingly pervasive effects of what is being called “nature deficit disorder.”

For generations American children grew up playing outdoors, with patches of wild and vacant land being their play sites just as often as were ball fields, backyards, or neighborhood streets. This “nature play” was filled with discoveries, friendships, flights of imagination, physical exercise, and a steady stream of small challenges — whether crossing a shallow creek on a fallen log, avoiding the haunts of hornets and bullies, or learning to return home in time for dinner.

Today such childhood free play in the outdoors is virtually extinct, replaced by rigidly scheduled activities, early and constant pressure to excel at adult-defined goals, and countless hours of hypnotic electronic play. Something vital has been lost from childhood. We have created new types of at-risk and disadvantaged children who can be found in all economic, social, and geographic circumstances. Here’s a summary of what they are challenged with.

<u>Risk or Disadvantage</u>	<u>Potential Cause</u>
Retarded development of social skills	Too much solitary electronic play
Asthma and other allergenic diseases	Poorly developed immune systems due to limited exposure to the outdoors during early years
Obesity and related health problems.	Sedentary childhoods leading to poor adult fitness habits
Fear of the outdoors.	Constant media hype of very limited dangers
Little sense of place or community	Ubiquitous indoor childhoods
Stilted imaginations and creativity.	Children fed a constant diet of adult-led and adult-designed activities
Delayed development of good judgment. and problem-solving skills	Lack of unstructured childhood play in diverse and stimulating settings, where children encounter frequent small challenges and obstacles
Dislike of, and frustration with, schooling	Schools focused on testing and quantitative results, rather than joyful learning and child-centered explorations
No enjoyment of the outdoors and its benefits of recreation, solace, beauty, and adventure	Very limited childhood exposure to the outdoors, hence discomfort and fear
No personal ethic of environmental stewardship. . .	Lack of early emotional bonding with nature

Green Hearts believes that the type of childhoods we provide and encourage for our offspring will have a lasting effect on the future of our society and on the future of the natural world. For generations, a common theme and joy in childhood was playing outdoors, in unrestricted spaces that seemed wild and free to the children. This play, it turns out, was far more than *just play* for children: **it was vital training for their bodies, their minds, and their values.** If we want those three dimensions to be healthy and fulfilling in the generations of children to come, then parents, educators, conservationists and child advocates need to work together to find ways of bringing frequent “nature play” back to childhood.

Learning to Care

During my youth in southern California, the annual visiting carnival gave out, as prizes, small “chameleons” that had a tiny collar on their necks, attached to little chains with safety pins on the other end. For a few days after each year’s fair, boys gleefully wandered around town with these lizards pinned to their shirts and riding on their shoulders. Of course, the lizards — which were actually common anoles, not true chameleons — inevitably died within a few days. Their use as prizes left an enduring memory, but it seems terribly cruel now.

Truth be known, abuse of small animals has long been a common part of children’s nature discovery and play. Flying June bugs on threads, frying ants with magnifiers, pulling the wings off butterflies — all have been routine bits of childhood for eons. Typically such actions are not done out of any evil intent, but rather out of a mixture of curious experimentation and misplaced love. For instance, I once heard a fellow environmental educator relate her childhood story about earthworms. She wanted to be a veterinarian when she grew up, and thought it would help to practice. The form of practice she chose was to take a bottle of Bactine™ and a hypodermic needle (who knows where she got it!) and inject worms with the liquid! A colleague sitting near to her immediately added her own story: she loved worms so much as a child that she used to tie them together into bracelets that she would wear on her wrist! Were these two girls brutes-in-training? It would seem not, since both of them grew up to dedicate their lives to teaching children and adults about nature.

Young children do not fully understand death, or how much power they have over other life forms. Vicariously hearing about this power on a TV show or reading about it in a book is not real to a child; it only becomes real and meaningful when they experience it directly. After many years of hearing stories of seemingly well-adjusted children injuring animals, I have come to believe that such unintentionally cruel behavior is actually an important part of the process of developing empathy for other life forms. For some children, I think, it is only after they graphically discover their own harmful power that they start to be careful and caring in their interactions with nature. It seems a painful route to this learning, but I believe it is

a fairly normal one. Parents and teachers should never encourage such behavior, of course, but neither should they react to it as though it’s a portent that their child will grow up to be a maniacal killer!

My own related story made such an impression on me that I literally remember every detail, even though it happened over 40 years ago when I was in fifth grade. I was walking to my friend Tommy Vincent’s house, where we were going to work together on a school science fair project: making a simple electric motor out of nails, wire, a test tube, a cork, and a battery. A couple of houses down the block from Tommy’s, I spied an American robin on a lawn. Being a typical eleven-year-old boy, I picked up a rock and threw it at the bird. It never dawned on me that I would hit it; I’d never hit anything I aimed for in my whole life!

Sure enough, I missed — but the rock hit in front of the bird, bounced up, and struck it from below as the robin was taking off. The bird crumpled back to earth and began running away, with an obviously broken wing dangling from its side. I was shocked and truly mortified, and I immediately began chasing the bird, trying to catch it and help it. I have no idea what help I could possibly have administered, but chasing it around the neighborhood was certainly not a good start! It turned out to be a moot point, since the bird disappeared into a dense shrub thicket and got away from me. It undoubtedly died within a matter of hours or days.

This incident really hurt me. I felt terrible about it — and, in fact, still feel guilty about it today. But the very power of that memory tells me that it made an impact on my conscience and values. None of us should intentionally steer children towards that harsh kind of first-hand learning about life and death, but neither should we begrudge it when it happens. It just might be a uniquely powerful element in learning how to care for and about the natural world. Besides, there are many things that desperately threaten the world’s ecology, but children with rocks and Bactine-filled needles are not among them!

(Adapted from *Kidscaping — Creating Natural Yards for Children’s Play*, a book currently in development by Ken Finch.

Green Hearts As a “Social Enterprise” Pioneer

An emerging trend in the nonprofit world is for charitable organizations to operate more like for-profit businesses — not just in their day-to-day structure and procedures, but also in how they fund their on-going activities. More and more non-profits are trying to move past a dependence upon constant fundraising for contributions, and instead seeking to supplement their donated funds with significant income streams from their core activities or other fee-based initiatives.

This approach is being called “social enterprise,” defined as “an organization or venture that advances its social mission through entrepreneurial, earned income strategies.” Sometimes these “earned income strategies” use initiatives that are totally unconnected to the parent organization’s mission, but which still commit their full profits to that cause and dutifully pay any federal or state taxes for “unrelated business income.” An even better model, though, is when the earned income activities can, in themselves, directly advance the organization’s nonprofit goals. Such ventures are never done to the exclusion of contributed funds, but instead can stretch those contributions much further or allow them to be dedicated to special projects, rather than used for routine operations.

During Green Hearts’ early years we are putting an emphasis on the social enterprise model, using our speaking and consulting services to directly generate income which funds our operations. Green Hearts is fortunate to possess mission-focused expertise and skills that are valued by other public-service agencies

and organizations. This approach has let us “get up and running” without significant start-up funding. When Green Hearts is ready to advance to its next planned stage of operations — building our first nature preschool — major charitable donations will be crucial for funding the facility construction, site work, and initial operating outlays. However, once these initial expenses are covered, our future preschools will be able to fund their on-going costs through tuition income and other mission-related fees.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of a successful social enterprise approach is that it allows a nonprofit to devote more of its staff and volunteer time to directly serving the community, rather than constantly searching for funds. Green Hearts is aiming for just that goal, but in our early developmental stages we are still vitally in need of contributed support. Our earned income is growing steadily, but it is not yet enough to support our entire operational needs. Can you help?

If you support Green Hearts’ focus on *bringing children and nature back together* and value our long-term goal of financial self-sufficiency, please consider making a tax-exempt gift to Green Hearts during this crucial, early period of our work. Your gift now — even in a small amount — will have a real, meaningful impact on our mission. Please use the form below to make a membership contribution, or send a general donation in any amount you choose. Thank you, in advance, for helping us to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature!

Membership in Green Hearts

Sometimes you take out membership in an organization to gain direct benefits for yourself and your family, like joining a fitness center or a country club. Other times, though, your membership may be more philanthropic in nature: you are committing your dollars to help advance a good cause. Guess what? Green Hearts thinks it has a *great* cause for your consideration: **restoring and strengthening the bonds between children and nature!** You will not get discounted greens fees or a sauna to soothe those sore muscles, but you *will* be helping to create the next generation of conservationists!

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!

Ohio Nature Center Planning Preschool

As one of the largest and most respected nature centers in the country, the Cincinnati Nature Center (CNC) has long been a leader in its profession. CNC is extending that heritage as it considers a nature preschool at its main campus in Milford, Ohio.

Over the past two years CNC has been a primary force behind an innovative effort known as “Leave No Child Inside — Greater Cincinnati,” which is combining the resources of many community groups to increase children’s outdoor play. Now the nature center is aiming to take their commitment a big step further by starting their own preschool. Like others of its kind, this will be a fully-licensed preschool sited in a beautiful natural area where the enrolled children will play and explore daily, in any safe weather and under the gentle guidance of trained teachers.

To help with its initial planning, CNC contracted with Green Hearts INC to help evaluate its site and current buildings, provide guidance on staffing and other operational issues, and create realistic budget projections. Ken Finch completed this consulting work in April, and CNC is now looking to incorporate the nature preschool venture into a new strategic plan that its staff and Board are currently preparing.

Green Hearts INC
4502 South 42nd Street
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Bringing Children and Nature Back Together

Need a Speaker?

Green Hearts Founder Ken Finch loves to speak to conferences, meetings, 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



Photo by Bob Baillie

*A few kids, a few logs, a guiding hand, and time to explore
— a perfect recipe for nature play at the Schlitz Audubon
Nature Center preschool in Milwaukee*