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Eye on the Environment

Let's Take a Walk By Diann Ericson

Let's take a walk. What images form as you read that sentence? I suggest the images it generates give a powerful message at a time when a lot of us are feeling anything but powerful. The significance of this small group of words is the essence of the renewal of something very precious to our health—physical, economical, emotional, spiritual and, yes, environmental.

What a thought-provoking coincidence that this “Let's take a walk” idea resurfaces during an economic slow down. At a time when we are tightening our budgets a walk can actually help. Granted we are not talking miracles here. But we are suggesting a practical idea that will fill a few small needs now and re-establish a greater need as financial woes recover.

Adults over 30 years old had more opportunities as children for unstructured play in undeveloped areas. In talking with over 1,000 school-aged children in his research, Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, determined that most have little or no time for unstructured play in nearby fields, wooded areas or creeks.

How many of you can remember a time before “recycling” was a household word, before the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970 during Richard M. Nixon's presidency? At least in my little window of the world, the idea of recycling did not exist before then.

Just as Earth Day changed the way many of us think about the natural resources of planet Earth, a movement is underway to once again recharge our awareness and actions as caretakers of this planet.

Explore for a moment a timeline of natural resource uses and issues in America.

- Colonists began settling the Atlantic coast as early as the 1500s and 1600s. The views of the colonists and Native Americans regarding the use and ownership of land and its abundant natural resources varied greatly. Some colonists saw the wildness of the New World primarily as a threat to survival and others saw it as an economic opportunity. These attitudes combined with the settler's apparent perception that Native Americans were not utilizing America's natural abundance established a prevailing attitude by the new arrivals that the continent's resources were theirs for the taking.
- Gold strikes, loss of buffalo, cattle drives and railroads ended the nomadic lifestyle of Native Americans and drove many them to reservations by the late 1800s.
- The disappearance or extreme decline of native species such as passenger pigeons, big horned sheep, buffalo, and moose occurred by the early 1900s.
- President Theodore Roosevelt's love for the western wildness led to the creation of the U.S. Forest Service, state agencies for the management of fish and game, and many national parks in the early 1900s.
- Concerns over air and water quality, toxic waste and many other planet health issues led to protests in the 1960s, the inception of Earth Day, and numerous environmental quality laws of the 1970s.
- The power of oil became a political reality with the oil embargos of 1973 and 1979, presenting the U.S. government and citizens with a reality check regarding fuel shortages, mandatory federal speed limits and a need for alternative sources of energy.

- The prosperous 1990s and the increase of two income-earners per family corresponded with an increased use of electronic games and ushered in a 25 percent decline in visitations to national parks.

Now, in 2009, childhood obesity, diabetes and diagnosis of behavior problems are rising significantly. Rick Potts of the National Park Service noted during his speech at the recent Children and Nature Conference in Missoula that according to statistics youth spend on an average 39 hours in front of a screen each week and only 30 minutes a week in unstructured play outdoors. He also pointed out that public recreation time in the outdoors has decreased by 30 percent since the 1990s.

Another statistic indicates that 40 percent of U.S. households were farms in 1910 compared to 1.9 percent in 1990. This evidence suggests a possible disconnect with today's youth and nature.

But this is going to change; it is changing now. In 2004, the U.S. Forest Service issued a bulletin to its Regions and Districts across the country stating that more of the agency budget should be spent on conservation education. I know because the document came across my desk.

Project Learning Tree's *GreenWorks* and similar programs designed to get kids outdoors, have influenced many of us in the field to institute our own outdoor programs.

In 2005 Richard Louv's book gained literary and environmental education recognition. In 2006, the U.S. Forest Service advertised for grants to put "More Kids in the Woods." Vermont began a program called "A Forest for Every Classroom," and in September 2008, Montana held a "Children and Nature Summit" attended by over 300 teachers and natural resource educators. In April of 2009, 18 teachers from the Helena area will participate in the first "A Montana Forest for Every Classroom" training.

To sum it up, people aware of the power of the natural environment have not disappeared and are creating a ground swell of reawakening similar to

Earth Day, 1970. If by chance you are unaware of these events or unengaged it is not too late.

The first step is to make time for a walk. Because there is always too much to do, you have to make time. If you are new to walking, make it short, easy and close to home.

Ask a friend or family member to come along. If you walk or hike alone tell someone where you are going. Alone or not, take bear spray.

Determine your expectations for your walk. If you cannot decide on a place that meets your expectations, call someone and ask for advice.

At Swan Ecosystem Center, we love to assist residents and visitors with their walking, hiking, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing questions. Of course there are many other agencies and organizations in the area that would also welcome a call, not to mention your neighbors.

Get out multiple times a week. Keep up this new program for at least a month before you assess the value of the experience. It would take a book to discuss all the benefits. You are probably aware of many.

The bottom line is not just your health, but the health of the planet. Please read *Last Child in the Woods* and all the articles you come across regarding outdoor recreation use in the United States, and finally, most importantly, get outdoors.

Tell us about your walking program and what works for you. We are keeping track of walking and hiking programs, locations and helpful hints to pass on to others when they call.

I don't think any group of people in the country has more places nearby to walk than those of us who live in the Seeley, Swan and Blackfoot valleys. However, if you need ideas as to where to walk, we can help. Please feel free to call Swan Ecosystem Center, 754-3137.