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“Children in cities can become adapted to almost anything—polluted air, treeless avenues, starless skies, aggressive behavior, and the rat race of overcompetitive societies” - Elwood L. Shafer

# Research Needs for Programs That Provide Natural Environments for Children

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**ABSTRACT.** The major emphases of selected Symposium papers are underscored, and some personal thoughts are presented on how childrens' understanding of natural environments will eventually affect the quality of this Nation's environment. Special emphasis is given to research needs for insuring the establishment, protection, and management of natural environments for children in urban environments.

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**NTERACTIONS among children, the natural environment, and where and how these children live are fundamental determinants of this Nation's quality of life. My objectives are to underscore the importance of natural environments for urban children, and to suggest research needs for community, city, state and Federal programs that provide those environments.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS

This area of research has high priority for several reasons: Today, about 75 percent of the Nation's children live in densely populated areas. In just a few short years, these same children will be using the democratic process to make decisions about environmental issues that are of major concern to this country and the world. If a large proportion of today's children are not aware of and do not appreciate how their lives depend on natural environments, how, as adults, will they be able to help make intelligent decisions about the use, management, or protection of air, water, soil, flora, and fauna—their basic life support systems?

Children in cities can become adapted to almost anything—polluted air, treeless avenues, starless skies, aggressive behavior, and the rat race of overcompetitive societies. But in one way or another, the child has to pay later for the adjustment he or she makes to undesirable conditions. (The cost includes, for example, increases in chronic diseases and decadence of human values.) Urban children are often inclined to take nature for granted, to accept it without curiosity or question. Children become aware of events and things only when they come close to them or when an event affects the child spiritually or physically and penetrates the consciousness as an out-of-the ordinary, significant experience.

Furthermore, the earlier a child experiences and values his natural environment—sees with awe the first spring flower, or responds to the alluring, magical promise of a wooded glen—the deeper and more enduring will be his faculty for perceiving and experiencing his relationship with and dependence upon nature.

But nature has been thrust so far out to the edge of modern life that many times children are obliged to live without it altogether. Furthermore, in our zest for helping—or pushing—our children up the ladder of success, we often neglect an important aspect of their growth: we often do not provide the en-

vironments that children need for the idle times of introspection, rumination, and fantasy that are vital to the development of a rich personality. I believe that nature can provide the backdrop not only for contemplative thought, but also for the healthy play and exercise that are so vital to their physical well-being.

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, "We shape our environments, and afterwards our environments shape us." By preserving, maintaining, developing, and protecting natural environments in urban areas for children to use for recreation, we can create a variety of conditions that call forth active and creative responses during a child's early years, responses that may be far more important for intellectual and emotional growth than economic factors or passive exposure to cultural artifacts.

Looking forward to the not-so-distant day when perhaps 9 out of 10 of the Nation's children will live in cities, we should pursue with all our vigor and imagination those ideas that mean for all of them and us a more healthful and worthwhile life. Natural environments where children can satisfy their longing for recreation, quiet, privacy, independence, initiative, and open space, are not frills or luxuries, but real biological necessities.

Furthermore, we face not only the problem of how to provide green space for urban children, but also how to bring about the degree of institutional change that such provision calls for. The answer is not "blowin' in the wind," nor will it come with the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Indeed, if we rely on such panaceas, we will more likely experience the groaning than the greening of America for today's urban children. The developing tensions of our society cannot wait that long.

We must work with speed and competence to build into our institutional systems the possibilities for a fuller expression and expansion of the values of natural urban environments. Changing some of our old priorities and practices in urban development is a task for the tough-minded and competent. Those who come to it with the currently fashionable mixture of passion, poetry, and platitudes only add to the confusion.

## RESEARCH NEEDS

A top priority challenge for management

research is to devise ways to get large numbers of potentially delinquent urban youth (14 to 19 years old) involved in summer work programs that relate directly to natural environments—either in or near the city. Elements of the natural environment provide the overall framework in which such programs would operate, and something that youth can relate to in a meaningful, tangible way. The assumption here is that if we provide aesthetic natural environments where youth can do meaningful tasks, there will be the short-term benefit of a decrease in crime in the cities during the summer, and the long-term benefits of children's better understanding and respect for themselves and others. Granted, the assumptions are largely intuitive at this point. Feasibility studies are needed to determine the probable costs; the kinds and distributions of local, state, Federal, and private areas and facilities available or capable of being renovated; and the direct and indirect benefits that would likely accrue to society and to the individual participants. In other words, the research challenge is to devise a strategy, estimate the costs, and document the support systems that would be required to obtain specified benefits from large-scale summer work programs in natural environments for youth.

Another challenge is research related to the public policy issues that provide or don't provide adequate green space for children. A key problem is: How shall we organize, control, and coordinate public and private policies for the development of green space for urban children so as to provide maximum opportunities at least cost? Or to phrase the question another way: What kind of quasi-public structure would best meet the needs for effective use of green space for children?

Next, what equitable and effective kinds of taxation and zoning would best support an urban land-use policy that would provide adequate natural environments for urban children?

Another research question: What means of public involvement work best in developing green space for urban children?

In what areas is compromise most acceptable in conflicts between the use of natural environments for children versus other social needs?

How can urban children's needs for green space be integrated with other urban land-use goals?

As you can see from this brief but somewhat comprehensive list of research questions that evolved from the sessions I attended, the related research tasks seem monumental and extremely challenging. No one said, however, that the research required for programs to provide

natural environments for children was going to be easy. This symposium has laid the foundation for beginning the needed research. To complete the task, we need to heed the advice of Mother Scott (an 83-years-young blues singer and Washington Grey Panther who performed during one of the sessions), "No matter how tough the problem, be the labor large or small, if a task is once begun, keep on goin'."

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