

WHY THE WILD CENTER MATTERS

BY PHILIP G. TERRIE





We asked Philip G. Terrie, a renowned scholar of the Adirondacks, to mark the 20th anniversary of Betsy Lowe's idea to establish a natural history museum by contributing his thoughts on the significance of The Wild Center. He replied with this essay.

In a 2006 book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv paints a dreary picture of a critical corner of modern American life (and probably of life far beyond our shores). Too many children today don't know where milk comes from, let alone what photosynthesis is. These kids are unfamiliar with the spiritual uplift, the jolt of transcendence, that a sunrise, a mountain vista or even a glimpse of a robin on the lawn can provide. They see the sunrises, the mountains and the robins, of course, but through no fault of their own, their lives have been constructed in such a way that a true appreciation of these natural wonders is elusive.

The result is human lives that may be technologically hip but are spiritually impoverished and scientifically barren.

Louv runs through a familiar litany of explanations for the growing disconnect between our children and the natural world: over-structured play, with organized leagues for everything but little time for kids to poke about in the woods on their own; the creepy seduction of high-tech toys like smartphones, television and video games; a shameful paucity of green spaces in urban areas, especially in poor neighborhoods; and the absence of hands-on experience with nature in the science curricula of many, if not most, of our schools. If kids don't get acquainted with the joys of real science by the time they leave middle school, they probably never will.

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As Adirondack Murray reminded us nearly a century and a half ago, the wilderness is good for you. It's good for the mind, burdened by the stresses and anxieties of modernity, and it's good for the body, neglected in the chair-bound and screen-fixated regimen of contemporary life. A walk along the river will not cure all your ills, but you'll be better off afterwards than you were before. Knowing something about the migratory and foraging habits of a black-throated blue warbler won't make you an ornithologist, but it can make your daily life richer and more meaningful and make you a better citizen in a world in desperate need of widespread understanding of how sound science works.

For not only do our children need the spiritual sustenance that nature provides, they need to know that nature is a complex, interconnected system and that its intricacies will eventually reveal themselves to the patient and sensitive mind. Our tattered planet is in trouble. The catastrophic decline of biodiversity; the fouling of air, water, and soil; and looming above everything else the apocalyptic threat of global climate change—for these and so many more reasons, our only planetary home needs our help. And we can't help it if we don't understand the problems. Scientific illiteracy is one of the great crises facing our species today. People who can't grasp the complexities of the atmosphere can be led to believe that there is no such thing as climate change, that it's a hoax. If there

is anything that we can do to prepare our children and our grandchildren for a perilous future, it is to encourage them to understand how this once-magnificent planet and all its complicated, interconnected systems work.

The Adirondack institutional response to what Louv calls "nature deficit disorder" is The Wild Center. It does what every science teacher in the world is trying to do: make nature interesting and make nature fun. If hope remains for our continuing habitation of this threatened earth, it is in the efforts of The Wild Center and all the other science educators in thousands of schools and science centers who are doing their best to address the alienation of our children from the intricacies and glories of nature.

Last year more than 5,500 students came to The Wild Center. When you contemplate the environmental threats to our health and sanity, when you ponder what's wrong with a culture that denies demonstrable facts in the name of profit, think about all those yellow school buses pulling in to the parking lot at The Wild Center. Think about the *Ways of Knowing*, a new program to introduce children (and their parents) to how Indigenous knowledge and ways of understanding take us to a better appreciation of how the natural world nurtures our bodies and souls. Think about the Wild Walk, where children (and their parents) go up to the top of the forest canopy and reach



Betsy Lowe this summer at her camp, where she first imagined The Wild Center 20 years earlier.

for that elusive combination of education and joy. Think about the Youth Climate Initiative, with its international perspectives—an inspiration for youth summits held around the world. Think about Visual Thinking Strategies, a curriculum developed to help children and their perceptions of nature. Most of all, think of how The Wild Center has imaginatively fashioned the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park as its own endlessly fascinating laboratory and classroom.

Twenty years ago a flame was lit in the energetic mind of Betsy Lowe. Lots of people have good ideas. It takes a special sort of individual to devote mind, body and energy to turning good ideas into reality. In a very short time, Betsy marshaled legions of people, raised incredible amounts of money and stirred us all. The Wild Center in such a short time has become such a landmark on the Adirondack

cultural and educational scene that imagining its absence is impossible. The almost-daily caravans of yellow buses turning off Hosley Avenue onto Museum Drive are a constant reminder of The Wild Center's mission and its accomplishments. And they are substantive evidence of what a dedicated woman can do.

About the author: Phil Terrie has been researching and writing about the Adirondacks for nearly 50 years. A former assistant curator at the Adirondack Museum, he is professor emeritus of American Culture and Environmental Studies at Bowling Green State University. He has also taught at SUNY-Plattsburgh, SUNY-Potsdam and Hamilton College. He is a Forty-Sixer and sits on the Board of Directors of Protect the Adirondacks. He lives in Ithaca and Long Lake.