

The Last Child in the Boat?

Will you be the last of the boaters in your family?

Strange question, you say?

Maybe not.

The next time you drop the hook in a quiet cove, whether you're boating on saltwater or fresh, and Mother Nature delivers one of her special shows just for you — an osprey dive-bombing for dinner, a crab sashaying sideways under the keel, a monster bass going airborne for a bug, an unseen beaver tail whacking the water to warn you away, or a rainbow coming to life on the heels of the squall that just blew through — Richard Louv wants you think about that very question:

Will I be the last one in my family to experience the priceless perspective on the natural world that you can only get from being on a boat?

Louv, a *San Diego Union-Tribune* newspaper columnist and the author of seven books, sincerely hopes that will never happen. But what he discovered in researching his latest book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, should make all boaters take a careful look at the coming generations — and ask if this is the future they want.

Afloat, and without the remote. Getting kids into unstructured outdoor activities — like just “messing about in boats” — can improve the mental, physical and spiritual health of coming generations, says author Richard Louv.

The Nature Deficit

“Today kids are well aware of global threats to the environment but their physical contact, their intimacy with nature on a day-to-day basis is fading,” says Louv, whose book is raising storm flags everywhere, from child psychology circles to the conservation community to the outdoor recreation industry.

Louv, an avid angler and boater, has put in perspective what every 21st Century citizen can see: children now spend far more time looking at television screens or computer monitors than they do experiencing the real world just beyond their four walls.

As a fifth-grader in his hometown of San Diego put it: “I like to play indoors because that’s where all the electrical outlets are.”

In his book Louv says that as American youngsters increasingly plug-in for playtime — to TV, the Internet, cell phones, video games, etc. — detachment from the natural world around them is leading to behavior problems, attention disorders, childhood obesity and even depression. Louv coined the term “nature deficit disorder” to describe the problem and independent research suggests he is on to something.

At the University of Illinois researchers have discovered that children as young as 5 showed a significant reduction in the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder when engaged with nature. A Cornell University study has shown that nature-play like hiking, camping and fishing, relieves stress in children and even contributes to development of an environmental stewardship ethic later in life.

Formal environmental education courses in schools, while important, can't replace first-hand experience “getting dirty and getting wet outdoors,” Louv maintains, and ultimately this disconnection from nature could produce a generation lacking enough interest in the outdoors to preserve and protect the natural environment in the future.

Changing Course

“My generation is the last to build a tree house or a float around on a home-made raft,” says the 55-year-old Louv, who did both growing up in Kansas. “Much of the current generation of young parents did not have the kind of experience I did.

“Unfortunately, when they finally recognize the physical, mental and spiritual ben-



efits of outdoor play for their kids and want to do something about it, they won't know how to get started," he adds. "This is where boating and fishing organizations could make a real difference."

Team sports have their place, Louv says, but they can't replace the kind of outdoors experiences that will be necessary to reverse the nature deficit trend ("Soccer is not nature," he says). It's the unstructured play time in a grove of trees or splashing on the shore of a lake that will ultimately secure the future of outdoor activities like boating and fishing that we value today.

"Could just being out on the boat with grandpa and grandma provide the connection with nature that so many kids are missing?" he asks rhetorically. "I think it can but this needs some serious consideration by all of us, no matter what kind of boating activity we engage in."

"I suspect some of us take the boating experience a bit for granted and don't necessarily connect the importance of those 'Mother Nature moments' on the water for our children and grandchildren," Louv adds. "Maybe we need to be more conscious of such experiences and perhaps even sort of ritualize them while out on the water."

But parents, grandparents and private boats aren't the only way to reach kids. Louv notes the potential for exposing children to nature on the water through existing youth education opportunities like community sailing programs "where grounding on a sand bar that wasn't there a few hours earlier can teach a whole lot about the tidal cycle." Or Sea Scouting where teens who might have no other access to a boat can experience the wonders of the water world while also learning about boating safety and seamanship.

Pier Pressure

"I wasn't sure about being a Sea Scout until my friend Suzy invited me on a raft-up," reports 16-year-old Michelle Escobedo. Her weekend on the water last August brought four Sea Scout boats and their crews together in a quiet cove on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay.

"We slept out on the deck that night and I've never seen so many stars," the Gaithersburg, MD, teen says. "It was so cool. I found the Big Dipper, then this guy Charlie showed me how to find the North Star from there. I'm a Sea Scout now and I love it."

That kind of experience with the natural world can be repeated over and over in myriad variations anytime youngsters get out on the water in a boat, says Charles Holmes who heads Boy Scouts of America's older youth division that includes Sea Scouting.

"Sea Scouting is a coed program for teens, age 14 through 20, but for younger males Boy Scouting offers 11 water activity-related merit badges," says Holmes who is also a member of the BoatU.S. National Advisory Council.

Many BSA camps around the country put kids on the water in sailboats, canoes or powerboats, Holmes adds, and nature study can be as important as aquatics in the programs. For example, at BSA's Florida National



Blue Hour: Parents and grandparents can help focus the next generation on the wonders of the natural world that surrounds the boating life.



Getting wet and dirty exploring the outdoors is one way to ensure a future for conservation and activities that depend on healthy resources, like boating and fishing.

High Adventure Sea Base at Islamorada, the focus is on experiencing the underwater wilderness of the Keys.

Camps operated by Girl Scouts of the USA can also put young females in touch with the natural world through aquatic activities. And while small by comparison to conventional land-based Girl Scouting, its Mariners program for girls age 11 to 17 is focused specifically on boating, according to Teri Marzano, a BoatU.S. member who skipper a Mariners unit in San Francisco.

"This is a great age to introduce girls to the water," Marzano says. "They're open to new experiences with their girl-peers and they soak up the adventure like sponges."

No matter what the youth program, boaters can make a significant difference for coming generations though volunteering, Holmes says. By offering access to the water and a "boating perspective" to existing programs, whether in Scouting, Boys and Girls Clubs or through a youth conservation organization like the Izaak Walton League of America's new "Young Ikes" program, experiencing the natural world from a boat can do wonders for kids.

And it could help turn the tide of the looming Nature Deficit Disorder, ensuring that we will never see the "last child in the boat."

— By Ryck Lydecker

BLUE HOUR

Louv's message has struck a particularly strong chord with conservation and environmental organizations, and sparked such ideas as reserving time for a daily "green hour" — a specific time in which to let kids appreciate the natural world around them.

Perhaps boaters and anglers should come up with their own "blue hour," Louv says, a conscious effort to observe nature that would become a regular part of your routine while underway.

Maybe you do these things already but just never thought of it as a "blue hour." So if you have a special time or technique for introducing young crewmembers to the natural world that's all around them when afloat, we'd like to hear about it. Send your thoughts and tips to: magazine@BoatUS.com.