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Connecting kids with nature

Idaho first lady Lori Otter has launched a statewide effort to encourage youths to get outdoors, which is good for their health and potentially beneficial for the environment.

Idaho is the "land of plenty" when it comes to the great outdoors. Many Idahoans spend time outdoors year-round, and visitors to our state marvel at its beauty.

Did you know, however, today's children are increasingly disconnected from the natural world? Many youths have few outdoor experiences. For all of Idaho's bountiful outdoors, a good number of our children don't spend time outdoors.



Meggan Mackey / Guest columnist

In 2006, author Richard Louv published "Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder." The book gave voice to an undercurrent of concern among child advocates that children are suffering physically, mentally and emotionally from a disconnection with the natural world. The results, Louv argues, are sobering. Youths are experiencing obesity, diabetes, depression, attention deficit disorders and pharmaceutical use at an alarming rate.

The "cure" for many of these physical, mental and emotional problems may be just outside the door! Outdoor activity inspires children to be more active, both physically and mentally. Children who become engaged with nature at a young age are more likely to care about nature and be active in outdoor pursuits when they become adults. They, in turn, become parents who understand the value of the nature-child connection and the natural world around them. Ultimately, these children will develop a sense of place -- and respect for our land.

Idahoans are acting to help our youths grow in healthier ways by spending more time outdoors, including unstructured outdoor experiences as simple as watching birds or building a snowman.

The Idaho Children and Nature Network is a coalition of diverse agencies, organizations and private citizens united in the cause of empowering all Idahoans to lead healthy lives by developing a sense of place in Idaho's outdoors. Its mission is to "connect children with nature in Idaho, from backyards to mountaintops."

The network will leverage collective resources to increase community awareness; provide access to information; increase participation in outdoor activities and foster respect and appreciation for Idaho's outdoor heritage; improve integration of environmental education; create private-public partnerships; and work to improve the physical, mental and emotional health of Idaho's children. The network's vision is to "collaborate with private and public partners to empower all Idahoans to lead healthy lives by developing a sense of place in Idaho's outdoors."

On Friday, Idaho's first lady Lori Otter launched the network's statewide initiative, "Be Outside," with the governor's proclamation for 2009 as the "Children in Nature Year." Look for kickoff events in your community throughout this year that you and your family can participate in to get a taste of Idaho's outdoors.

A creative Web site, www.beoutsideidaho.org, is packed with fun, accessible and affordable "101 things to do outdoors" and other helpful resources. Idaho: "Be Outside!"

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