

GREEN MATTERS

Mary Alice Snetsinger

A friend recently sent me an article about why staying on the trail is bad for nature. At first blush, this seemed odd. After all, I have worked with Conservation Authorities and Parks Canada, and there has always been messaging about staying on the trails, taking only pictures, and leaving only footprints. And this makes a lot of sense in public conservation areas or parks, where venturing off-trail might get you lost or in trouble, possibly requiring rescue by park wardens, and where trampling of natural vegetation might have unplanned impacts on rare or sensitive vegetation. As we used to tell the kids at the conservation areas, if everyone picked the flowers, what would be left for others to see?

But as the author expanded his theory, he reminded me that most of the naturalists I know first developed their love of nature as children, playing more or less unrestricted in nature. How well I remember the first time I saw an American Bullfrog. Who knew they were so huge? I was actually scared for a few seconds, but it was then only a few moments before I had caught it. I was so enamored of this beauty that I persuaded my father to let me put it in a coffee can and bring it home. Of course, we hadn't been in the car long before my mother discovered the subterfuge. I reluctantly released my bullfrog in my uncle's farm pond, terrified that he might become "frog legs" when my uncle discovered him, an unlikely scenario with which my father teased me.

I've written about "nature deficit disorder" before,

the recognition that kids are not playing outside any more and don't have as much interest in nature. There are all sorts of reasons at play, but the fact is that children simply don't get the same exposure to nature and, when they do, it is most often highly supervised. My own children were two and six when we finally found our place in the country, and the only hard and fast rule when they went outside was to "stay away from the creek in the spring." They were otherwise free to puddle in the creek, play in the mud, collect "treasures," and catch snakes. My daughter collected many dozens of stones that took her attention. Though she recently celebrated a milestone decade as a young woman (having completed her graduate studies on a species-at-risk snake), I am still finding some of those

stashed treasures as I try to declutter our home. And it's that free play in nature that the article argued was missing, and critical to building a strong and effective conservation movement.

Far from the days of children left to explore on their own, we have seen the rise of so-called "helicopter parents," overprotective parents who don't allow their kids freedom to take risks and explore, discour-

aging independence by being too involved. Of course it would not be appropriate for everyone to do exactly as they like in public parklands. But a complete hands-off approach is bad for nature. People need to interact with nature to develop an affinity or deep love for the plants and animals that share this planet. What you don't value, you don't protect. What you don't protect, you will lose. How can we understand nature if we don't spend any time in nature?

As e.e. cummings said, the world is "mud-luscious" and "puddle-wonderful." So, on Earth Day in April, why not get out into nature for the day? We have several local conservation areas, or your own back yard just might do.

