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Throwing kids out(side)

Contact with outdoors is better for kids, educators say

By CE SKIDMORE
skidmore@poststar.com
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Who would want to play in the woods anyway? You can't get your cell phone to work, there's no place to dock your iPod and you're out of luck if the battery in your PSP goes dead. Pair that with the threat of Lyme's disease, bird flu and possible spontaneous combustion due to global warming and you might as well stay inside altogether.



ERIN R. COKER - COKER@POSTSTAR.COM Ndakinna Education Center Head Skills Instructor and Ecological Director Ivan Erchak leads a group of second-graders from Lake Avenue Elementary School in Saratoga Springs into the woods at Ndakinna Education Center in Greenfield Center on Thursday.

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crowd. But local environmental educators and naturalists are trying to get the younger audience back.

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Martha Swan is the Spanish and French language teacher at Newcomb Central School. She also has a love of ecology. Swan, along with partner Paul Hai, the program coordinator for SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry's Adirondack Ecology Center in Newcomb, headed a weeklong program to raise nature awareness in children. The program called "Leave No Child Inside," celebrated the life of renowned naturalist Rachel Carson, who was largely responsible for informing the nation about the danger of pesticides like Dichloro-Diphenyl-Trichloroethane, or DDT.

"With the Rachel Carson project we were able to facilitate a conversation about nature with nearly 200 kids from six different schools in the North Country," said Swan. She considers her work important to "the health and welfare" of kids.

"When kids aren't

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connected with nature, which is especially ironic considering the region in which we live, we can't expect them to care for it and if they don't care for it now they're not likely to care as voters or consumers," Swan said.

While, overall, Swan has noticed a disconnect between kids and nature, she is hopeful that recent media attention to issues of climate change and hybrid technology will prompt discussion in more schools and homes but she warns that the conversation must be handled delicately.

"Almost daily there is a scientific report on (environmental issues) but no one is talking about how we help kids now, not just protect their future, but help their emotional

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needs so they don't become numb or so scared that they succumb to apathy or despair," she said.

Linda Karner, park manager of Moreau State Park, said keeping children involved in the outdoors is key for their development.

"Kids need to live in the natural world because it encourages imagination and compassion and respect," she said.

Karner, who has been with the park for the last seven years, said age plays a factor in piquing interest.

"The younger we get them involved, the better," she said. "But I've worked with kids as old as sixth grade and up and there seems to be a natural fascination ... show a kid a frog for the first time and it's always going to be neat."



ERIN R. COKER - COKER@POSTSTAR.COM NdaKinna Education Center Head Skills Instructor and Ecological Director Ivan Erchak talks to a group of Lake Avenue Elementary School students (Saratoga Springs) on identifying animal tracks during the group's visit to the Greenfield Center-based nature center Thursday morning. NdaKinna is Abenaki for 'Our Land' and is a 90-acre preserve which offers hands on learning activities such as tracking and wilderness crafts.









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Friday morning at Moreau Lake, two of the park's educators were introducing froglike creatures to a group of Hudson Falls kindergartners. Naturalist Gary Hill and an intern, David Alfred, alternated leading youngsters toward a shallow end of the lake, where they were invited to net tadpoles and newts.

Inside the park's nature station, which is full of stuffed Adirondack creatures and assorted tanks of slimy living things, Hill lectured the students about local wildlife. A small boy pointed at a stuffed fawn, barely larger than a Jack Russell Terrier, on a shelf above Hill's head.

"Did you shoot that with a gun?" the boy squeaked.

"Nah ... he was hit by a car and we stuffed him so you could learn about him," Hill said. "It happens."

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