

Kids' Planet... with Thorne Nature Experience



NATURE and COMMUNITIES



by Dr. Oakleigh Thorne, II

I have written before about “biophilia,” the human need to have regular contact with nature. Now there is much evidence that shows how important this is for entire communities, especially urban ones. It is important to design communities so that contact with nature is “built in” to all project planning. This is actually called “biophilic design.” The idea is to increase people’s chances of connecting with nature in their daily lives, which is even more important for children!

We sometimes talk of green and blue spaces. Green spaces apply to vegetation, such as grasses, plants, bushes, and trees. Blue spaces are ones that contain water, like streams, ponds, lakes, waterfalls, rivers, and harbors, for example. Some may be totally natural, and some may be human-made, with various gradients in between. All are good and important modifiers of human behavior.

Contact with nature has been shown to support a whole range of health benefits and can also promote social harmony, therefore leading some people to be more generous and caring. It may bring individuals closer to each other in more friendly relationships. In other



Photo courtesy of Thorne Nature Experience

words, they become more neighborly! This usually gives them a greater sense of belonging to the community and a sense of satisfaction. Nature clearly seems to have such power.

Simply viewing beautiful nature scenes can bring out positive social behavior such as kindness, altruism, resource-sharing, and more cooperative behavior, even in the presence of strangers.

It has also been shown that being near or surrounded by nature develops higher levels of mutual trust and a will-

ingness to help one’s neighbors, that is, to more easily help one another. One study involved 145 public housing residents living in identical residences. Those living with views of concrete and asphalt were reported to have more aggression and violence than those living with views of grass and trees, that is, with “green” views. What was even more interesting was that the greening of urban vacant lots often reduced the rates of vandalism and violent crimes, especially when the local residents

were involved in creating the greenery, such as community gardens.

This shows the sense of awe that nature brings out in humans. It creates a profound response to what they perceive as “the wonder of nature,” which can inspire people to solve problems together more cooperatively and creatively. This mutual trust and willingness to help one another is usually absent in barren settings that are devoid of nature. It makes more obvious the need for green (and blue) spaces in urban community settings.

People with little or no connection with nature certainly benefit from the company of friends and family who lead them into contact with nature and inspire them to have joyful times therein. This contributes to their own health and well-being and, therefore, benefits other species in the ecosystem because of these peoples’ developing respect for all forms nature.

Dr. Thorne is founder and honorary president of Thorne Nature Experience (formerly Thorne Ecological Institute), a non-profit organization headquartered in Boulder. For 65 years they have helped “connect youth to nature!” For information about their programs, check their website at www.thornenature.org or email info@thornenature.org or please call (303) 499-3647, ext. 100.

