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Zimo: Program helps keep children involved in the outdoors in Idaho

Maybe it was digging in the backyard dirt pile and finding worms.

Maybe it was wading in a creek and looking under rocks for strange insects.

Then again, it could have been being towed in a sled on a cross-country ski trail, or sitting in a canoe dragging a Mepps spinner and catching trout.

I don't know, but my kids loved the outdoors as youngsters, and that love is still strong as they go camping, backpacking, biking, hunting and fishing as adults.

That's why it's disturbing to hear Richard Louv, author of the book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder," talk about children of the plugged-in generation, who aren't exposed to the outdoors and nature.

Luckily, my oldest grandson loves to go on a hike. My other younger grandkids, who don't hike yet, smile when they see puppets of snowy owls, polar bears and hawks.

I heard Louv on New Horizons with Bob Kustra on Boise State Radio last weekend. I've heard him several times and each time I wonder where today's kids are headed. For many, the only nature they know is on TV.

Will they have an appreciation for the natural world and want to protect it? Will they care about our national parks, state parks, wilderness areas and clean rivers?

I don't know, but there are a whole bunch of volunteers working to make sure kids are introduced to the outdoors.

Take the Bogus Basin SnowSchool, which is sponsored by the Winter Wildlands Alliance, Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area and the U.S. Forest Service.

I got to see the program in action this winter. Kids get to snowshoe at Bogus Basin where they learn about wildlife and snow ecology.

"It was great working in small groups learning how to build snow caves," exclaimed Trevor Hopkins, a Trail Wind Elementary School sixth-grader, who participated in the program this winter.

"Penguin sledding rocked!," he said.

Students also inspect snow flakes. They build snow shelters. They dig snow pits to see how the snow is layered and learn about avalanche danger. They learn how the snowpack sustains life in the West. They learn to identify animal tracks and how those animals survive the winter.

It's pretty impressive and a huge success because of volunteers and sponsors. The success of the Bogus Basin SnowSchool proves there really is a need for programs like this.

This is the third season and the program has gone from introducing 35 kids to the outdoors the first year to about 1,000 this past winter. It's for kids from third grade through high school.

About 40 percent of the kids who have participated probably would have never gotten in the mountains in the snow. They were from under-served or low-income areas. About 64 percent of the kids had never been on snowshoes and about 42 percent had never been to Bogus Basin.

In addition to the kids and volunteers, the program had about 133 parents or adults that accompanied the field trips. Many of them had a new experience.

Volunteers, the Bogus Basin Nordic Program, the U.S. Forest Service and sponsors are important for the program. REI gave the program a \$5,000 local store grant to purchase snowshoes and supplies.

The program also got a More Kids in the Woods grant from the Forest Service and raised some money through partners, mainly the Bogus Basin Nordic Group and Bogus Basin.

We're lucky in the Treasure Valley because there are so many ways to introduce kids to the outdoors.

Between 8,000 and 10,000 youths learn about fish and wildlife at the MK Nature Center each year.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game sponsors Free Fishing Day each June where fishing clinics are given across the state. The department reaches more than 4,000 kids annually.

We're lucky with clubs like the Eagle Kiwanis and Boise Capital Lions that sponsor kids' fishing derbies. Some kids would never have an opportunity to get out and fish without the help of the clubs.

It's scary that kids aren't going outside anymore and they are losing a direct relationship with nature.

Luckily, we've got groups working to reverse the problem.

GAS PRICES

Motorists continue to be gouged by outrageous gas prices and it is definitely affecting how we enjoy the outdoors. I decided to put it into perspective.

Last weekend we drove to Leslie Gulch in southeast Oregon for a campout and hike. It was about 85 miles from my house to a campsite in the fantastic desert canyon.

My pickup with the camper gets between 16 and 20 miles per gallon depending on wind resistance, highway speeds, backroad speeds and the weight of gear, dogs and people.

OK, let's say I got 17 miles to the gallon. The trip was a total of 170 miles. I estimated that I used 10 gallons of gas. Probably, \$33 worth. Well, divided by two people, that's \$16.50 each.

For that price we got a great campout in the desert and a super hike up a narrow canyon filled with unbelievable rock formations. You'd pay more than that for a dinner and a movie.

Read more about camping in the May 8 edition of Idaho Outdoors.

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