

All Children Need Nature—Worldwide

By Cheryl Charles, Ph.D., President and CEO, Children & Nature Network
IUCN-CEC Steering Committee, 2009 - 2012

All children need nature. More people are recognizing that need—and working to restore its experience in children's lives throughout the world.

When Richard Louv and others of us founded the Children & Nature Network (C&NN, www.childrenandnature.org) in 2006, we knew there was a significant worldwide need to reconnect people with nature—beginning most urgently with children. Children everywhere, for a host of reasons, are more sedentary, more disproportionately using electronic media more of their time and more than they do much of anything else in waking hours, and have almost no time at all doing anything like being outdoors in nature—whether walking to school, building forts, turning over rocks, making fairy houses, climbing trees. The evidence is clear, and growing all the time, that most children are spending almost no time at all outdoors in nature, much less exploring freely, by their own invention and direction. That disconnect is associated with a host of problems including obesity, diminished creativity and less problem-solving ability. Critically important to the work of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), children who do not have direct experiences with nature during their formative years are less likely to grow up to care about the Earth, its diversity, and its protected area.

So, we've known for a long while that there is a worldwide need. We hoped there would be a way to bring together a worldwide movement to reconnect children and nature. We've been working to achieve this goal since we founded the Children & Nature Network, and thinking of it long before. And we've brought those issues to the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication (IUCN-CEC), where the importance of connecting children and youth with nature has received strong support. Our vision is of a world in which all children play, learn and grow with nature in their everyday lives. All children.

As one example of our international efforts facilitated by CEC, I participated in the 2008 World Congress of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Barcelona. Under the auspices of the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication, chaired by Keith Wheeler of the United States from 2004 - 2012, I convened and moderated a panel on Nature-Deficit Disorder—with representatives from India, The Netherlands, Hungary, Mexico and the US as representative countries talking about this worldwide phenomenon of children's increasing disconnect from nature. We were able to get some language into a motion passed at the IUCN World Congress in 2008 which spoke to the importance of reconnecting children and nature—for their health and well-being and that of the Earth's itself.

IUCN's World Congress is held every four years. I've just returned from the World Congress held in Jeju, South Korea in September 2012. I traveled to Jeju with some optimism that at least some additional progress would be made in support of the need for a worldwide movement to reconnect children with nature. I knew we would be launching a new, and significant, "Research Summary of Children & Nature Worldwide"—co-developed by the Children & Nature Network

and the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication. We released the Summary in Jeju, with the attendant rationale for its importance.

I knew there would be a CEO Summit on Connecting People with Nature, with CEOs of national parks and protected areas from throughout the world along with CEOs of non-governmental organizations, including the Children & Nature Network. And I knew there would be a resolution presented for action by Dr. Annelies Henstra and others, building on ours of 2008 that spoke to the importance of connecting children and youth with nature and taking it to a significant new level—that of a child's *right* to nature.

The Research Summary was a given. We had prepared it, and planned for its launch to this worldwide audience. The next two events—the unanimous passing of the Jeju Declaration on Connecting People with Nature and the passing of the motion in support of the child's right to nature—those were accomplishments beyond my hopes, and within my dreams. I find myself genuinely thrilled that more happened to help further the worldwide movement than I had hoped for at this point in time.

We've a tremendous amount of further work to do—as we know. Let's take a moment now, however, to give some thanks for the incredible momentum that can be felt from the volcanic island of Jeju, South Korea to every island and every continent on the planet.