

Every child has the right to connect with nature

Summary

Connecting children and nature is an immensely important topic. This perspective should not be missing on the 2016 Day of General Discussion on “Children’s rights and the environment”. Why this subject is so important will be explained in this article. It also advocates an independent right of the child to connect with nature and to a healthy environment. The Committee on the Rights of the Child is requested to draft a General Comment on Children’s rights and the environment, including connecting children and nature as a follow up of the 2016 DGD. This contribution concludes with a successful example of a good practice in the Netherlands in the field of connecting children and nature.

A personal story

Last year I got married in May. To celebrate our first wedding anniversary, my husband organized a nice canoe trip with family and friends. I shared a boat with my mother and my little niece, she is 10 years old. It was a beautiful day! The sun was shining exuberantly, huge chestnut trees blossomed alongside the water, we looked forward to a day of experiencing nature in the (Dutch) countryside. So far, so good. Cruising through the streams however, my niece noticed brown lumps floating on the water. It looked dirty.

“What is that?” she asked, a little worried.

My mother and I did not know exactly what it was, but we knew that something was not right. There were no croaking frogs. No fluttering butterflies, no wildflowers, no stork, no dragonflies. While we were paddling, my niece pointed every now and then at a floating dead fish. The water in the streams and ditches was completely lifeless! What we saw was the result of intensive farming. The brown lumps in the water were algae, as I understood afterwards. The explosion of algae is caused by over-fertilization, and algae stifle all life in the ditch. I realized that life has increasingly left the Dutch countryside. What remains is a monotonous, lifeless environment, an impoverished natural system. I felt sorry for my niece. It was clear she felt intuitively something was wrong with the water, and it saddened her. Where are the places she still can experience healthy and abundant natural systems? Not in the Dutch countryside. And certainly not in the Dutch cities where most children grow up. Where is that enchantingly beautiful forest, species-rich and full of ancient giant trees? Not in the few forest areas of the Netherlands. There the timber industry has been given a firm finger in

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the pie. Which means amongst others that most trees are felled once they have reached their target diameter (40 to 60 cm).

Disconnection of children and nature

Why am I telling you this personal story? As an example. A small, everyday example of the increasing alienation of children from nature. Worldwide there is a significant decline in the quality and quantity of children’s direct sensory experience of the natural world. Where nature used to be the playground of children, nowadays most children grow up in cities or slums, where they live a life disconnected from nature. Already fifty percent of the world population lives in cities and this will be seventy percent in 2050 according to predictions of the United Nations. The technology available in the richer part of the world attracts children to stay indoors and spend many hours behind some sort of screen. My example relates to the *quality* of the experience. Although my niece - unlike many other children - undertakes activities in nature frequently, she is faced with an impoverished natural system and thereby with an impoverished experience. By comparison, my seventy-two year old mother, also in our canoe, played daily in the meadows surrounding her parental house. She loved to catch tadpoles in the ditches (at that time still full of life). Meanwhile, the landscape of my mother's childhood disappeared. The former meadows have become urban area. A noisy highway runs right in front of my mother’s parental home.

Concluding: global developments such as growing urbanization, expanding human populations, accelerating land and resource consumption, industrialization, deforestation, biodiversity loss and ecological degradation all have resulted in significant declines in opportunities for children to encounter healthy and abundant ecosystems.

A great loss for childhood and a dangerous trend for humanity

Does it matter that many children today encounter substantially fewer opportunities for direct experience with nature? You may find my personal story not particularly shocking. You might think: there are worse things in the world than disconnection of children and nature. You're probably right. Refugee children, child prostitution, serious environmental pollution and the consequences for the health of children, all of this requires our immediate attention. But let us also open our eyes to the silent, creeping tragedy of the disconnection of children (and adults) and nature. Personally, I consider it a great loss to childhood. Furthermore, I fear that this alienation trend is in the long term an outright threat to humankind. Let me explain both sides of the picture:

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1. Young children are usually fascinated by animals and plants. They react elated at the sight of a robin or a squirrel. Children are increasingly deprived of the free pleasure, wonder, beauty and glory that nature has to offer them. Besides, natural environments have many benefits for the health and development of children. They explore their environment with hands and feet, nose and mouth, eyes and ears. In this sensory way they learn about their environment. A benefit of nature for example: it appeals to all the senses at the same time. Children thus learn to use their senses diverse and balanced. In his famous book "Last Child in the Woods" Richard Louv brings together a body of research indicating that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy child development. He links the rise of obesity, attention disorders and depression to the absence of nature in the lives of today’s children, and calls this : “nature deficit disorder”. There is increasing research in this area available.
2. The development of respect for the natural world (see Article 29 paragraph 1 sub d) begins with enjoying and experiencing nature. According to Kahn and Kellert (Children and Nature 2002, p. xvii) “the extinction of child experiences with nature creates a downward spiral, whereby lack of interaction with rich ecosystems leads to lack of concern for their protection, which leads to further lack of interactions. The extinction of experience is thus a cycle whereby impoverishment begets greater impoverishment.” Since children are an inalienable part of nature, the health of the earth and the health of our children is inseparable. The fate of nature and the destiny of our children is inextricably linked. There is no one who can truly understand the consequences of climate change, deforestation, pollution, species mortality, etc. But it could well be true that the survival of humanity is in jeopardy.

Concluding: reconnecting children with nature is an immensely important topic.

IUCN resolution “Child’s right to connect with nature and to a healthy environment”

Personally I am an advocate of an independent right of the child to connect with nature and to a healthy environment. Many current child rights in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) are related to nature and the environment. For example the right to life (Art. 6) to leisure and play (Art. 31), to health (Art. 24, see especially paragraph 2 sub c) and to education directed to the development of respect for the natural world (Art. 29 paragraph 1 sub d). Existing child rights however cannot cover the whole subject. It is such an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of

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mankind, and the consequences are so unpredictable and comprehensive that it needs its own position in the CRC. An independent formulated right makes the problem visible in its full extent and underlines the fundamental importance of a healthy environment for children and of reconnecting children and nature. It is about time to call a spade a spade.

Important in this respect is the IUCN resolution I have submitted (IUCN: International Union for Conservation of Nature). The World Conservation Congress of IUCN adopted the resolution "Child's Right to Connect with Nature and to a Healthy Environment" on 11 September 2012. The significance of the resolution is:

1. a broad international endorsement of the child’s right to connect with nature and to a healthy environment. IUCN is the world's oldest and largest union of nature organizations and forms a platform of more than 1200 nature organizations (for example WWF is a member organization) and 200 governments and governmental organizations.
2. commitment of IUCN to actively contribute to the establishment of this right in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The resolution calls on IUCN's governmental and non-governmental organizations to promote and actively contribute to the international acknowledgement and codification of this right within the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Agenda items for the DGD 2016 on children’s rights and the environment

Reconnecting children with nature is an immensely important topic. The DGD 2016 on children and the environment should not miss this perspective. The thematic area of focus is “Children’s’ exposure to environmental toxicants” and “Children and the effects of environmental degradation”. As far as I can judge it well, reconnecting children and nature is yet underexposed. To ask for attention for this subject, I have submitted this written contribution, which seems to fall somewhat outside the prescribed framework. I'm aware of the General Comment on the right to leisure and play, in which the Committee on the Rights of the Child paid due attention to disconnection of children and nature in the context of this right. I would like to ask the Committee to decide - as a follow up of the DGD 2016 - to draft a General Comment on Children’s rights and a healthy environment, including connecting children and nature as a self-contained subject. I conclude with a successful example of good practice in the Netherlands in the field of bringing children into contact with nature.

Example of a good practice in the Netherlands: Cool Nature

Cool nature stands for natural playgrounds of at least two hectares near inhabited areas. The natural playgrounds are designed in collaboration with local children and adults. Parents, teachers and children can play, learn, help and move there in a natural environment. Schools can attune their curriculum to these places. The government has facilitated the development and creation of Cool Nature parks in the context of the climate program. A public-private partnership emerged to bring children into contact with nature. From 2009, there are twelve inviting nature playgrounds realized in the Dutch province of Gelderland. The playgrounds are well managed by an independent foundation, and embraced by the local community. Children come from far and wide to spend a day at a Cool Nature place. The province of Overijssel starts with four pilots in 2016. See the (Dutch) website: www.coolnature.nl

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NB For the sake of readability and clarity, I used no references to scientific sources. For those interested in reports and studies revealing evidence of the health benefits of connecting children and nature, I refer to the website of the Children and Nature Network: www.childrenandnature.org