

**Testimony of Gina McCarthy
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Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans &
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
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Thank you for inviting me to offer testimony today on “The Nature Deficit: Reconnecting Kids with the Outdoors.”

Preparing for today’s event made me think back a little to what the world was like when I was a youngster.

It was a time when you left the house early on a Saturday morning – and you were not likely to return until the streetlights came on.

But that was ok. Staying inside was punishment. What you wanted to do was get outside to ride your bicycle, explore the neighborhood woods or find some adventure somewhere.

I bet if I asked all the adults in this room to think back to the best memories of their childhood, those memories would not be indoors. They would be of time spent outdoors – with friends. - or on family trips to a park, a beach or a campground.

I know the world has changed a great deal since I was a child – and most changes have been very positive. The passage of time, however, has taken a heavy toll on our children and their ability and willingness to simply go out and play, unless you count sports or other organized activities, which I do not.

Today, youngsters are not itching to go outside. They are stuck indoors, plugged in to cable TV, DVDs, high-speed Internet access and electronic games. Even if a child wants to go out, the cars drive too fast and no one wants to let their kids out of their sight for safety sake. In many ways, our sense of community is confined to our homes, schools and places of worship.

Whatever the reasons our kids stay indoors, the results are alarming.

Protecting the Health and Well Being of Our Children

More and more children are getting an unfortunate head start on health problems such as diabetes and heart disease that they will carry into adulthood.

Medical studies show that in the mid-1970s, five percent of kids were overweight. In 2002, 23% of preschoolers were overweight or obese. Currently the national average of overweight kids is 33%, and obese kids represent 17% of the population. In the last 30 years, rates of overweight and obesity have tripled among preschoolers and quadrupled

among school-aged kids. In fact, the prediction is that by 2010, one-half of all American children will be overweight.

In addition, children are less active than they have ever been.

One-third of kids watch more than four hours of TV a day. Young children spend more time watching TV, video games, or computer, than doing any other activity other than sleep. In the United States, fewer than 10% of kids receive daily physical education and only 15% of kids walk to school.

Experts also tell us that spending time outdoors is not only important for physical health, it is critical to the development of cognitive and social skills. Is it any wonder that more and more of our homebound youngsters are taking medication for depression and other behavioral problems?

A number of experts from many fields have written eloquently about the importance of the connection between nature and ourselves and our children.

Edward O. Wilson, the Harvard professor noted for his work in the field of biodiversity, addressed this topic head on.

In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, “The Diversity of Life, Wilson wrote, “Given the means and sufficient leisure, a large portion of the populace backpacks, hunts, fishes, birdwatchers and gardens...They crowd the national parks to view natural landscapes, looking from the tops of prominences out across rugged terrain for a glimpse of tumbling water and animals living free. They travel long distances to stroll along the seashore, for reasons they can’t put into words.”

“These are examples,” Smith said, “of what I have called biophilia, the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life.”

Yet, as Richard Louv has observed, we are in danger of losing this important connection.

Louv is a newspaper columnist in San Diego who is leading the charge across our nation to get children back outside. He wrote a book entitled, “Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder.”

In his book, Richard Louv writes, “...at the very moment that the bond is breaking between the young and the natural world, a growing body of research links our mental, physical and spiritual health directly to our association with nature – in positive ways.”

Louv wrote it is critical to restore this bond because “the health of the earth is at stake...” He says, “How the young respond to nature, and how they raise their own children, will shape the configurations and conditions of our cities, homes – our daily lives.”

It is clear, that if we fail to get our children back outside and fail to have them reconnect with nature, our society as well as our children, will suffer. Show me a generation of adults that did not experience the wonders of nature firsthand when they were young, and I will show you taxpayers and voters who will not care about preserving open space, maintaining biodiversity, keeping the air and water clean, maintaining our forest and parks, and keeping our land free from pollution.

There is of course, no way to turn back the hands of time. There is no way to wave the magic wand and return to the so-called “good old days,” when children could fly out the door and play outside to their hearts content. If we are going to get our children outside again we need to make it easy, safe and fun for parents and their children to rediscover the wonders of nature and some old fashioned sense of community.

Connecticut’s Answer: *No Child Left Inside*

In Connecticut, that is exactly what we are trying to do through an initiative we call, *No Child Left Inside*.

With the encouragement of Governor M. Jodi Rell, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection launched *No Child Left Inside* in March of 2006.

The goals of *No Child Left Inside* are to reconnect youngsters with the outdoors, build the next generation of environmental stewards and showcase Connecticut’s state parks and forests.

Exactly how are we moving to accomplish these goals? With a multi-faceted approach that tries to spread the word to families of all types in all corners of our state.

A key element of this initiative is a contest that is Connecticut’s own version of a “reality TV” show – complete with clues and prizes. We call the contest – which has families pursuing games and adventures in state parks and forests across Connecticut – *The Great Park Pursuit, The Connecticut State Parks Family Adventure*.

We recently launched the 2007 edition of the contest. More than 750 families signed up on our website to compete. The website – www.nochildleftinside.org - is also the “community bulletin board” for participating families, a place where they can share stories and photos of their days in our parks and forests. Take a look at the site, read some of the posing and look at the pictures. You’ll see what it looks like when families are having fun together in the outdoors.

This year’s seven-week state park contest kicked off May 12 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Bridgeport is an old industrial city, like many scattered throughout New England. But we used this occasion to show people that there are great places to visit everywhere in our state. At Beardsley Park in Bridgeport, families fished in a pond that we stock as part of an urban fishing initiative and participated in fun and educational games on acres of grass that surround the park.

This past weekend, participating families went on a hike at Haystack Mountain State Park in western Connecticut. Their reward was a view of Long Island Sound to the south and the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts from the top of a historic 34-foot high stone tower that sits atop this mountain.

During the next five weekends, families will visit five other parks, participate in a variety of activities and try to maintain their eligibility for three grand prizes. Families that make it to all seven parks will be eligible to compete for these prizes on the last day of the contest. The prizes are attractive packages of outdoor equipment – camping, hiking and bicycling – offered by Connecticut retailers.

Last year, more than 400 families registered for the game; about 200 actively participated. One hundred families came out for every week of the 2006 Great Park Pursuit and were eligible to compete for the grand prizes. This year we expect at least twice as many to be eligible.

No Child Left Inside: Other Program Elements

While The Great Park Pursuit contest is certainly a major focus of *No Child Left Inside*, it is only the beginning. It should be noted that many of these programs are part of a broad strategy to provide a safe and convenient framework to make certain families have a positive experience when they do get outdoors. You cannot hope to have a meaningful and lasting impact on people's attitudes if you literally drop people off in the woods – especially if they have spent little time there – and tell them to have fun. We need to provide proper guidance, support and activities that will capture the imagination of today's youngsters.

The other program elements include:

Additional park interpreters at Connecticut's state parks.

- Last summer we were able to add 10 interpreters, bringing our number to 47, and we will again have these positions this summer. The interpreters are able to offer programs and activities at our key parks, and to be on hand to make visits to them more rewarding and enriching. Our park interpreters help ensure that once people go to a park they will want to visit more parks.

Free passes to our state parks and state park museums at public libraries

- Working with the Connecticut Library Consortium, we have placed a free state park day pass in the main branch of every municipal public library in Connecticut. Library patrons can borrow the pass and use it for free parking – or admission - -at the major state parks where these fees are charged. Library patrons can also checkout a guidebook we are providing to research their state park destination. Libraries tell us this program has been a success and the park pass is an item always in demand. We are offering this program for the second year this summer. We also worked with libraries to coordinate their summer reading programs with activities in our state

parks – so youngsters could translate what they were reading into first hand experiences in the outdoors.

Safe Swimming

- We have made the DEP and the *No Child Left Inside* websites a clearinghouse for information on swim lessons offered throughout Connecticut by the Red Cross, the YMCA and city and town park and recreation departments. Once again, if we are successful in getting families back outside and to our park beaches, we want to make certain everyone knows how to swim and be safe in the water.

Expanded Environmental Education

- DEP is increasing and improving environmental education programs we offer at nature centers and state park facilities we operate. We are working to bring more school groups, scout groups and youth groups to these centers to engage in “hands on” learning that makes the outdoors come to life in a lasting way. That is the best strategy for leaving a lasting impression and stimulating a lifelong interest in youngsters.

Several of our new programs are aimed at reaching people in our society who are often left behind and provided with little encouragement or few opportunities to spend time outdoors. These programs, which are helping to increase the diversity of the people we are reaching, include:

Free state park pass for foster families

- Through a grant from Bank of America, we are able to offer, for the second year, a free state park pass to each of the more than 2,500 foster families in our state. The pass, which normally sells for \$40, is good for free parking at the major parks where the state charges parking fees. Last year more than 1,300 foster families accepted our offer and obtained a pass. We expect this number to grow this year. The foster family state park pass program vastly extends the reach of our *No Child Left Inside* initiative.

Urban Fishing

- Stocking fish at 11 “family-friendly” trout parks and at four new urban ponds – in coordination with local park department programs. We also offer free school-based fishing lessons in urban schools with the assistance of trained volunteers. There is no activity better than fishing to entice families to spend time together in the outdoors and we want to make certain this activity is readily available and accessible to everyone on our state.

Free Bus Transportation

- With the leadership of a regional water company in Connecticut, Aquarion, we are offering free bus transportation from Connecticut’s urban centers to four of the *Great Park Pursuit* activities. This bus service provides an “environmentally friendly” way for families to reach these events. It also, however, makes it possible for families lacking their own transportation to get outside and join in.

Lessons of *No Child Left Inside*

So, what do we have to show for our efforts with *No Child Left Inside*?

We believe Connecticut is paving the way and demonstrating that we can take action to address the issue of getting children back outside. No one is going to solve this problem overnight. But it is time to stop lamenting the problem and to take some action. Just get the ball rolling, and we can start building some momentum. The fact that this issue is before two Congressional subcommittees today is a positive sign that we are building some momentum.

Connecticut's efforts have received tremendous media attention in both our state and across the nation. This has helped call more attention to the issue of getting children back outside.

Staff from the Connecticut DEP is in demand – everywhere – to speak to state and federal officials about what we have done, how it is working and how others can build on the *No Child Left Inside* model.

Two other New England States, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, actually launched their own version of *The Great Park Pursuit* state park contest this summer. We even lent them our logo.

No Child Left Inside is more than child's play. It is a sustained effort to entice families and children back outside. Once they get out, they will discover the beauty of our state and national parks and the wonders of nature. They will also find out that fresh air and exercise is invigorating and healthfully addictive. We've also seen another real benefit – that these outdoor activities bring families together and help families make new friends. Put people outside, away from all of the distractions of modern life, and you are giving people some truly “quality time,” time when they can relax, talk, have fun together and reconnect with each other as well as nature.

Listen to what some of our families are telling us....these are notes posted on the *No Child* website I mentioned earlier. The excitement and spirit of the experiences these families have had in the outdoors comes ringing right through their words.

These letters came to us at the conclusions of last year's *Great Park Pursuit* contest:

“Kudos, kudos, kudos – please tell whoever dreamed up this idea that this is a real winner! CT has lots of outdoor activities to get our kids out behind the Game Boy, Play Station, TV, etc. I am very impressed with this.”

“We are so grateful to the many volunteers who participated and made this so wonderful. This will truly be an experience that the families in CT will remember and cherish.”

“We are so fortunate to have moved to this wonderful state... We had a wonderful time, and are grateful to the DEP for providing us with the experience.”

These letters have come to us with the start of this year’s contest.

The first one came to us after the first day. This family wrote:

“The first day was so exciting! When we arrived at Beardsley Park there were so many families enjoying the beautiful day, the various activities, and, of course, the fishing! Our 8 year old son thought the fishing was the best part of the day. So much so, that we were convinced to get fishing equipment for the whole family! He's been asking to go fishing just about every day! The fun games and activities were a hit with our 2 year old daughter. The fish prints made are still gracing the fridge door! We are having fun deciphering the clues and look forward to solving them and going to the next park. This is a great way for our family to spend quality time together.”

After taking the hike that was the activity for the second week, another family’s note on the web page said:

“We really had a great time Saturday. ... We met a few families that were as happy about doing this activity as we were. It was damp but not really cold and I was proud of my children and myself as I have not hiked in awhile with a backpack baby. Thank you all for your wonderful words of encouragement, and we look forward to running, hiking, or whatever into you again next time. Thank you also to Trailblazers for teaching us about letterboxing, we think we are going to try it out.”

Shaping a National Policy

No Child Left Inside is a wonderful, ongoing story of accomplishment in Connecticut. The most important point here, today, however, is to relate it to the work of your subcommittees.

How do we use the Connecticut experience to shape national policy and accomplish what we all want to see: more healthy children enjoying the outdoors and developing a lifelong appreciation for nature?

Let me share a few thoughts with you on this topic.

As always, funding is a key.

In Connecticut, we have put our initiative into place with limited funds. A large part of our success is due to grand prizes donated by leading retailers and free time on television donated by our local CBS affiliate to promote the Great Park Pursuit contest.

Ingenuity is great and we all need to work hard to stretch the resources available to us. But, if states are going to succeed in developing their own programs, they need your

support. And if we want to use our national parks and forests as a springboard to get families back outside, they also need your support.

And while more funding is needed for maintenance, repairs and upkeep to our national and state parks and forests, we also need additional funds. These dollars are needed to promote the parks, to attract families there and to provide them with programs and activities that make their visits memorable and exciting. We not only want to get families to our parks and forests, we want them to come away excited to plan their next visit.

In the public sector, we always face the budget squeeze.

Somehow, spending on items like parks, park programs and environmental education are the first casualties when the budget ax comes out.

But that is short sighted.

Nothing is more important than investing in the health and well being of our children. Nothing is more important than stimulating a new generation to experience the outdoors and to care about the environment and the very future of our planet.

This week's announcement of a new grant program from the US Forest Service to help state's address this issue is a good start – but it is only a start. The Forest Service, along with foundations providing funding, announced a \$1.5 million "Kids in the Woods" program to help more youngsters reconnect with nature.

The Forest Service says this program will fund 24 projects in 15 states that will reach more than 23,000 children. This points us in the right direction. But working together we can hopefully extend and expand this and other similar programs to help the 50 states reach more and more children. With additional federal funds for programming and outreach, states will be able to leverage support from foundations and the business community.

As Connecticut is showing, through programs like *No Child Left Inside*, we can make a real difference in the lives of our young people and the future of our nation.

“Sense of Wonder”

Just a few days from now, on Sunday, we will make the 100th anniversary of the birth of Rachael Carson. Rachael Carson was one of the leading environmental thinkers of the 20th century. She wrote the landmark book, “*Silent Spring*,” that warned of the dangers of the unrestricted use of pesticides such as DDT and probably save our national symbol, the bald eagle from extinction.

Rachael Carson understood the important Connecticut between the healthy development of children and the outdoors.

In another of her books, “The Sense of Wonder,” she wrote, “If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.”

That is exactly what we are trying to do in Connecticut through *No Child Left Inside*.

We are trying to have children and adults share memorable adventures in our state parks so that they can rediscover the joy, excitement and mystery of our world.

We hope that with the support of the subcommittees here today that we can begin building a program – national in scope – that will give families everywhere the opportunity to have that kind of life altering experience.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.