Our Year of the Child

Recently we Portlanders rejoiced at the birth of three lion cubs at the Portland zoo. Embedded deeply in their genes is the innate yearn to run free. In a zoo where those inclinations are suppressed by an unnatural structure, their genetic coding will nevertheless call them throughout life to bound effortlessly through the savanna or woodlands where their ancestors evolved.

Similarly, our children are born with an innate sense of wonder and curiosity about the natural world. Their genetic coding calls them to experience it directly through their senses—seeing, touching, hearing, and smelling, even with awareness that nature can be wild and scary.

Like lion cubs, children today are enveloped by a structure of cultural influences that disconnect them from nature and, in some cases, exploit them for commercial gain. Because these influences (listed below) are woven deeply into the daily experience of many children, it’s impossible for parents to completely insulate the child. But conscious adults all have an important role to play.

Commercialization. Born to Buy, by Juliet Schor, is a detailed account of the corporate targeting of children through branding with logos, corporate-sponsored fundraising for schools, and advertising to promote nagging of parents to buy certain products. By its nature, commercial influence insulates children from the natural world.

Regimentation and adult supervision. For many of us, childhood included a great deal of unsupervised time outdoors. Today, childhood is regimented through activities such as play dates, pre-school, and team sports. Also, because of concern for safety and health, adult supervision is rigorous. Collectively these activities isolate children from un-programmed experiences in the natural world.

Electronification. Living in an electronic wonder world, children learn at an early age to interface with electronic devices, on average seven hours a day according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Inherently, electronic gadgets isolate children from nature. Passive viewing of spectacular nature scenes transforms nature into a visual commodity or adventure site. Electronic images are no substitute for direct sensory experiences.

Over-stimulation. Nature has its own leisurely pace. In modern culture, excess stuff, the rapidity of images, and the decibel level of electronic sounds are out of sync with natural rhythms. This over-stimulation creates expectations of an immediate response. Short attention spans work against the patience required to watch a bird build a nest.

At the Center, we construct building blocks for a local culture of respect for Earth. In this report, we highlight our expanded children’s program in furthering that goal.

— Jeanne and Dick Roy, Co-Founders
Enrich Lives of Children

This year we formalized a three-prong strategy to weave respect for Earth more deeply into the elementary school experience and to elevate children’s natural sense of wonder in nature. First, we perfected our Eco-School Network model and transported it for the first time to a community outside the Portland Metro area—Corvallis. Second, we developed and tested a powerful new workshop, Being a Naturalist in the Life of a Child. Finally, through our project, Portlanders for Outdoor School, we were instrumental in preserving Outdoor School this year for Portland sixth graders.

Eco-School Parents “Green” Life at School

Our Eco-School Network (ESN) model was inspired by a compelling vision: Within every elementary school in Oregon, intentional parents take a leadership role to advance sustainable practices, form student green teams and nature clubs, and elevate respect for Earth. This year the initiative took a quantum leap with progress in five areas:

Portland ESN assumes statewide role. In Portland, where trained parents are working successfully in 33 schools, the role of the ESN has been expanded in two respects. First, steps are now underway to create a permanent structure for the Portland ESN, which has evolved rather organically over the past four years. Second, it will become a training and resource center for ESNs emerging in other communities. To build community this year, about ten ESN families spent a weekend at the beach with sixth-grader Duncan coordinating the efforts of the group in a beach cleanup.

Beaverton parents take charge. The Beaverton ESN was organized in the fall of 2012 by the first group of parents and teachers to complete the Center’s five-session ESN training. After its first school year of growth and operations, the Beaverton ESN now has 16 members from 13 schools, quarterly meetings, and a steering committee of three parents. Steering committee member Sharon Crowland says, “We collaborate to educate ourselves and our school communities for the benefit of our children.” Topics of interest have included electronics recycling, pesticides, gardens, student green teams, and milk carton recycling.

Corvallis ESN launched in new community. Last spring, the Center began an initiative to form an ESN in a community outside the Portland area. Corvallis was selected. Lifted by an extraordinary community response at two informational meetings last spring, the Center and interested parents planned a fall training to kick off the Corvallis ESN. With parents from nine elementary schools recently completing the training, the newest ESN is well underway. This work in Corvallis was a key test for our vision of transporting ESNs to other Oregon communities.

ESN training video produced. As an essential tool for transporting the ESN model, this year the Center created an ESN training video to be used in other communities. Produced by professional videographer, Jane Turville (creator of the documentary, The Greenest Building), the video was completed in time for use in Corvallis this fall. There a local facilitator coordinated the training, which flowed back and forth from video presentations to small group work.
Multi-ESN overnight retreat held. Our annual ESN overnight retreat, which began three years ago, passed a significant benchmark in late October. An event that began for Portland parents only has now evolved into a multi-ESN event where parents from Portland, Beaverton, and Corvallis share information in an emerging statewide association of ESNs. Taking time for hands-on work, this year the parents made mason bee houses to take home and put in their yards.

Enlisting Adults for Ongoing Role of “Naturalist”

This fall, the Center rolled out a program with an ultimate goal—train countless adults to assume the role of naturalist in the life of a child, 18 months through ten years old. The role can be filled by any intentional adult, regardless of knowledge about nature, with an ongoing relationship with a child—a parent, grandparent, relative, or friend. As an outreach tool, our Naturalist Team created a two-hour mini-workshop and 16-page manual distributed to all participants. The workshop can be held in a home or other space by a host who invites around ten friends, each with a special child in her community of friends and relatives.

In the workshop, participants learn the three keys to success. First, formalize an intent to be a naturalist, analogous to an engagement that deepens over time, not a New Year’s resolution soon to be forgotten. Second, even when not with the child, be conscious of your role as naturalist, thinking ahead about opportunities like a coming birthday celebration or walk to the grocery store. Finally, in the presence of the child, be mindful to amplify the child’s natural sense of wonder by, for example, exploring in greater detail the web of a grass spider spotted by the wary child.

Center Task Force Secures Another Year for Portland Outdoor School

Outdoor School, a 47-year Oregon tradition, has a magic formula. Enroll all sixth graders, regardless of means, in a three- to five-day residential camp. Add trained naturalists and enthusiastic high school counselors. The result: lives changed at a deep level through outdoor ecological education, not only for the sixth graders, but for the high school students who experience the power of facilitating change through purposeful work.

Because of funding issues, in April 2012 Portland Public Schools announced that Outdoor School was no longer in its budget. Co-Founder Jeanne Roy and Center volunteer Celeste Lewis responded with alacrity by forming a Center initiative, Portlanders for Outdoor School, to mobilize citizens to save the hands-on science experience. As they were preserving Outdoor School for school year 2012-13, a statewide long-range funding effort, led by Metro Counselor Rex Burkholder, was lobbying the 2013 session of the Oregon Legislature. Knowing that they could not rely on the bill passing, the team once again sprang into action to play a key fundraising role to preserve Outdoor School for this school year. We are now working with The Intertwine Alliance to develop a long-range funding plan.
Thank You Members & Donors!

To express gratitude for financial support of Center members, this year we celebrate the synergistic relationship between our members and dedicated volunteers. Memberships and donations fund the staff support required for volunteers to make extraordinary contributions. Presenters and mentors conduct Agent of Change trainings; trained experts facilitate Home Eco-Parties; steering committees guide the Portland and Beaverton Eco-School Networks; and planning teams guide us in establishing new programs like the Great Work Initiative.

Audrey Schaab illustrates the volunteer spirit at the Center. After taking the Center’s Agent of Change course, Audrey began her volunteer work as a trained Eco-Party facilitator. Living in Beaverton, she became our Washington County Coordinator to manage local outreach, served as a lead presenter, and trained parents who wished to join the Beaverton Eco-School Network. With two sons, ages seven and ten, she is now an active member of the team offering the Naturalist in the Life of a Child workshop.

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Changing Culture from the Ground Up

The cornerstone of our work is mobilizing adults and groups to be agents of change in building a sustainable culture from the ground up. In doing so, we create pressure and provide cover for public agencies and businesses to follow, and we inspire those in other regions to follow suit.

Center Agents of Change Collaborate

With over 900 graduates of the Center’s six-session course, How to Be an Agent of Change in Your Circle of Influence, the collective agent-energy burst forth in a new configuration this year—the joint project.

At an agent gathering last year, trained agents were asked the following question: “If you had three other Agents of Change to work with, what change would you like to make in your community?”

Jocelyn Furbush wanted to start a kitchen equipment library for Northeast Portland.

Her goals: (1) conserve resources through sharing, (2) promote the practice of food preserving, and (3) build local community. Tamara Olcott and Callie Schupbach agreed to join Jocelyn’s action team.

Early on, tricky issues arose like how to secure space for the library, keep track of items, and check them in and out. In seeking advice from two established kitchen equipment libraries, the women were delighted that Kitchen Share SE agreed to share its website.

For public input, in April the team organized a potluck, hosted by Preserve & Serve, to add details to their vision for Kitchen Share NE: What would people like to borrow? What classes would they like? What steps must occur for the site to open? The potluck attracted new volunteers.

Implementing their plan was not easy. In search of a space, Jocelyn contacted Redeemer Lutheran Church, home of the existing NE Tool Library. Recognizing the synergy of close proximity of libraries for both work tools and kitchen equipment, the church provided a room in the basement just down the hall from the tool library. In the meantime, Callie was hard at work creating needed forms and systems. Tamara painted the space and staffed the open times. Other volunteers began collecting tools and publicizing the new library.

With an opening last August, the library now has 30 members and 75 items of equipment. Neighborhood residents pay a one-time sliding-scale donation and rent appliances by the week. To date, Kitchen Share NE offers juicers, yogurt- and bread-making equipment, canning supplies, and food processors. Eventually, the women hope to offer beer-brewing equipment and food mills. In time, the space will also serve as a workshop space for canning and preserving classes. Equipment donations are welcome.

Results of an Agent Project

Three years ago, Agent of Change Michael Hall formed an environmental stewardship committee at St. Luke Church that planned a bi-monthly recycling collection event for church members to drop off their non-curbside plastics and electronics. As his vision widened, Michael’s project evolved into a quarterly Community Recycling collection involving hundreds of residents of Southwest Portland. In six events, the project has collected
- 4,371 light bulbs,
- 1,395 printer cartridges,
- 280 gallons of batteries,
- 131 cubic yards of styrofoam,
- 188 TVs and monitors,
- And 9 trucks of other electronics and metals.
Mobilizing the Legal Profession

Over the past few years, Oregon Lawyers for a Sustainable Future—a Center project, has woven the societal goal of sustainability into the fabric of the Oregon legal profession. One direct outcome is Oregon’s national leadership role. At the instance of OLSF, several years ago the Oregon State Bar created the Sustainable Future Section—the first bar section in the United States organized around the goal of sustainability. In August, at the St. Francis Hotel in California, the American Bar Association presented the Sustainable Future Section with its annual State and Local Bar Program of the Year Award for its pioneering work as a champion for future generations.

Building on this platform of national leadership, early in 2014 the Center will unveil a national initiative, Lawyers for a Sustainable Future, to encourage lawyer groups in other states to adopt all or portions of the comprehensive Oregon model. The launch will include an e-newsletter and new website to connect distant lawyers with Oregon resources such as “six tools for the sustainable law office” developed by the Center project. Lawyer groups in other states will become affiliates if they embrace governing principles including an acknowledgement of professional responsibility for ecological health and future generations. Already, Washington Lawyers for Sustainability, formed to follow the Oregon lead, is at work in our sister state to the north.

The overarching vision for this initiative is that lawyers, as champions and guardians of justice, will embrace an expanded view of justice to encompass future generations based on this current reality—what humans do today will have a direct impact on the rights and opportunities of future generations.

New Initiative

In the quest to create a sustainable culture, one thing has become self-evident in recent years. In the words of Stephen Jay Gould,
Center Briefs

Twenty years and counting. This fall, Co-Founders Jeanne and Dick Roy passed a key benchmark in their work together: 20 years of full-time volunteer service. At a celebration dinner honoring their unbroken service, the Roys received the inaugural SAGE Award, presented by Senior Advocates for Generational Equity, a Portland nonprofit. Its mission is “to inspire service by people over fifty in their communities to benefit younger and future generations.”

At the national level, Dick was nominated for the coveted Purpose Prize, which includes a $100,000 stipend. Advancing to a select group of semifinalists (among the 1,000 nominees), he was invited to be a 2013 Purpose Prize Fellow based on the Roys’ long-time public service as “people over 60 who are tackling society’s biggest challenges.”

2014 resolution—host a mini-workshop. Our new two-hour Naturalist in the Life of a Child mini-workshop is as simple as one-two-three to sponsor.

1. Think of a group of about ten friends who have an ongoing relationship with a child up to ten years old.
2. Select a location where they could meet for two hours—a home or other space.
3. Contact the Center, 503-227-2315 or info@earthleaders.org, to schedule a date and time for two of our presenters to show up. There is no cost.

Naturalist workshop adventures