

## **Go Outside & Play**

I'm going to get on my soap box again and say your mother was right when she told you to "go outside & play."

Young children are increasingly shunning the country, even as scientists outline the mental benefits of spending time in natural settings.

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Several studies on children with attention-deficit disorder show that, when surrounded by trees and animals, these children are less likely to have behavioral problems and are better able to focus on a particular task.

Humans are quickly becoming an indoor species.

In part, this is a byproduct of urbanization, as most people now live in big cities. Our increasing reliance on technology is also driving the trend, with a recent study concluding that American children between the ages of 8 and 18 currently spend more than four hours a day interacting with technology.

As a result, there's no longer time for nature: From 2006 to 2010, the percentage of young children regularly engaging in outdoor recreation fell by roughly 15 percentage points.

This shift is occurring even as scientists outline the mental benefits of spending time in natural settings. According to the latest research, untamed landscapes have a restorative effect, calming our frazzled nerves and refreshing the tired brain. After a brief exposure to the outdoors, people are more creative, happier and better able to focus. If there were a pill that delivered these same results, we'd all be popping it.

Research was done to measure the mental benefits of hiking in the middle of nowhere. The results were surprising: The hikers in the midst of nature showed a nearly 50% increase in performance on the test of creativity, and the effect held across all age groups. It also showed that there's a growing advantage over time to being in nature that peaks after about three days of really getting away, turning off the cellphone. It's when you have an extended period of time surrounded by that softly fascinating environment that you start seeing all kinds of positive effects in how your mind works. Our brain reacts to natural settings by, essentially, sighing in relief.

I read a story recently about a man who invited his wife on an impromptu camping trip to Elkmont Campground in the Great Smoky Mountains a couple of hours from their home in Tennessee. The fireflies that appear there in early June are unique. They're the only species in this hemisphere that synchronize their flashing light patterns. For two weeks every summer, the fireflies put on a show and then they are gone. The wife had been under a lot of stress (elderly mother, three teenagers, book deadline, etc.) and thought, "Great, but who has the time?" Her

husband was taking no excuses so she agreed to go thinking all the while she could work on “the important things” and get away too. When they got to the mountains, however, she found nothing worked, no cell phone, no Wi-Fi, not even a place to plug in the computer that had a drained battery. She thought she was marooned. Surely she should have brought that stack of magazines she needed to read or that bank statement that needed balancing. So they ended up sitting on a log and dangling their feet in Jakes Creek, playing cards, eating hot dogs. Twilight came and they followed the crowd to one of the prime spots for firefly viewing. In between the ancient trees, the fireflies lit up. Hundreds at first. Then thousands. Maybe even millions. A giant cluster would twinkle for five or six seconds before vanishing in the dark. Five or six seconds later, they would twinkle again as far as the eye could see. A perfect miracle. She said peace seeped from the top of her head to the soles of her hiking boots, as if her soul itself were aglow.

Cities are here to stay; so are smartphones. What this research suggests, however, is that we need to make time to escape the crowds, to explore those remote parts of the world (even though they may not be that far from where we live), that weren't designed by human hands but by the Most Famed Architect of all. We need to slow down and remember what life is all about. It's when we are lost in the wild that the mind is finally at home.