

Book Review

Review of *Children and Nature: Psychological, Sociocultural and Evolutionary Investigations*, edited by Peter H. Kahn Jr. and Stephen R. Kellert. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

Review by Susan Turner

First, a “child meets nature” recollection. I was about five years old—older than any of the four or five other kids I was playing with at the time. There was a small forest at the end of our street. We’d all been warned not to venture into the woods on our own so of course I decided to take my friends there on an adventure. I told them I’d found a witch’s house in the woods and that I could show them where it was. I vaguely remember entering the woods, my little followers in tow. I do more clearly remember being in the woods, “It’s this way, Over there.” I recall arriving probably about 15 minutes after starting out at a clearing, looking up and remarking to the group, “Well, it was here yesterday.” Various scary theories were floated concerning the house’s disappearance; then I recommended we head back. I distinctly remember realizing at that very moment, perhaps even just before it, I had absolutely no idea how to do that. But I had enough sense not to let on to the others my sudden fright—the sense in question being strictly self-interested since it wouldn’t do for the leader to admit she was lost. We walked for a while, I kept moving towards the lighter areas of the forest because I was afraid of the dark. After what seemed like a long time but was probably only 15 or 20 minutes, someone asked if we were lost. And just before the truth came out, someone else shouted, “here’s the big tree!”—the big tree being the point where we’d started. I’d taken them all on an exciting adventure in the woods and got them all home safely. But on that day, my idea of the forest, of all nature possibly, changed dramatically. When I went into the woods, nature was a stage, a backdrop for the exploits and adventures of a cast of fairy tale characters I had been introduced to in books. Hansel and Gretel had been the inspiration for that day’s excursion. Nature was something which could be dangerous but which ultimately aided the hero in his or her mission; advanced the story; bestowed wonderful and powerful gifts on the good of heart. When I emerged, nature had

become something, for lack of a word more true to the moment; a word I could not possibly have understood at the time, *autonomous* and as shockingly indifferent to my needs as I was, I suppose, to its.

The essays collected by Peter H. Kahn, Jr. and Stephen R. Kellert in *Children and Nature* employing, for the most part, qualitative and quantitative social science methodologies, explore the question of how children's interactions or lack thereof with nature impact the development of their environmental awareness as they mature. Specifically, they explore the concept and phenomena of "biophilia," loosely defined as "direct, positive affiliations with nature" (110). Several hypotheses emerge. Among others, that direct interaction with non-human animals has a beneficial effect on a human child's ability to develop empathy; though in cases of troubled children, this effect does not easily transfer to humans. Very young and adult humans appear to prefer to spend time in wild settings while adolescents prefer managed, urban environments. Early, positive exposure to natural environments appears to provide humans with a lifelong basis for extracting deep pleasure from such settings. "Unfortunately," Cynthia Thomashow writes in *Adolescents and Ecological Identity*, "the majority of adults live out their lives in dull awareness of their connection to nature, never clearly determining its influence on the way they see and consider the world" (266).

The point of the book, I take it, is to subvert this tendency by recommending intervention at an early age with positive, direct experiences of nature in its "wild" state. Of particular concern to many of the writers in the volume is what is perceived as a growing separation between nature and the child via the recent technological cocooning of the species. Given this trend, it is all the more urgent steps be taken to familiarize children with the world outside the technological cocoon. However, there is a troubling flaw with the book's thesis. It is romantically suggested that children of past generations (so not our children) were far more 'in touch' with their own naturalness and the natural world they inhabited than are children today. It is also argued, based on the data collected in thousands of studies, that being 'in touch' with nature leads children to develop environmental sensitivity as adults. Then there is Thomashow's remark, echoed by many other authors in volume, that most adults today are severely lacking in environmental understanding and concern. Clearly, even lots of direct, guided exposure to "wild" natural settings is not sufficient for the development of biophilia. If it were, we would not be in the current environmental crisis. My own direct experience of nature happened to produce something more like *misophysi* or *physiphobia*—nature was not my friend; was perhaps even my enemy.

Discussion after discussion reports the behaviour of children and teens observed in a wide variety of experimental set ups. Some of the results presented conflict—for example, the thesis in one essay that teens are not very interested in nature and in another they are extremely interested in nature. That, on its own, is not overly damaging however. What is of greater concern to me as a social science visitor, is the quality of some of the studies which are heavily relied on throughout. It seems a great deal is inferred from what appear to me to be small, sometimes biased samples. I often felt I was being presented with what appeared to be very plausible claims about children and nature backed up by what appeared to be very questionable data. I'm quite happy to defer to social science experts here in case my skepticism is unwarranted. However, the editors themselves, in their preface to the volume, caution the reader thus: "it is sometimes difficult using their [Heerwagen and Orians] method to distinguish predictions from post hoc accounts of our evolutionary heritage" (Kahn and Kellert, 2002). And later, a prescient remark about David W. Orr's essay, *Political Economy and the Ecology of Childhood*, "Although Orr draws on research findings to argue his case, his characterizations should be read—on our view—as provocative hypotheses, not established facts." Of course, we are aware that Orr would find this very caveat maddeningly conservative. He in fact asks in his chapter why we quibble about this fact or that fact when the overarching global problems are all too obvious" (2002, p. xvii).

Approached as a collection of meditations rather than as social science, *Children and Nature* is dreamily provocative. I could not help, as I read through it, dredging up old memories (the witch's house), trying to recall, whether as an adolescent, I had any special affinity with nature and if so, did I experience this as unusual among my peer group? How did it manifest itself? I thought a lot about my own children and their experiences. I wished I'd read this book when they were little. But I also couldn't help but think of the three of them now, as adults. They all had pretty much the same type and degree of exposure and interaction with nature (a moderate amount so far as I can tell). One had every allergy in the book and once told me she thought she was "allergic to nature." The oldest is an environmental activist and the youngest (20) has no special interest in nature at all. They are all vegetarians. I can't help but think this sort of variety is pretty pervasive. And I did not come across any data in the book to suggest otherwise. In other words, the book, for the most part, comes across as a spectacular example of the scientific imperative which demands data be collected according to a system which promises to lead to the truth in support of common sense claims. The common sense claim here: "Make sure children get lots of fresh air

and interactive exposure to unmanaged natural environments and non-human animals and opportunities to engage in pet care. There is no guarantee it will make them better environmental stewards but it won't make them worse ones and they will grow up happier for it.”

As sometimes happens in the interpretation of qualitative no less than quantitative social science data, the premises here are often less believable than the conclusions.
