



December 2007 • U.S. Department of Agriculture • **Forest Service** • Office of Communication Contact: Shelley Gardner 202-205-1028

Briefing Paper

“Our most important resource in this country is not forests, vital as they are. It is not water, although life itself would cease to exist without it. It is people. The challenges of climate change and looming water shortages will not be resolved in a few years. It will take generations. Today’s children—and theirs—will need to be able to take the baton and continue the race. For that, they will need a full understanding of why forests are so valuable, along with a strong land ethic. It is our job to give them both.”

—Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell

Parents, educators, physicians—and land managers—are increasingly concerned with the growing disconnect between children and nature, and the kind of future we are creating for our children. The Forest Service can play an ever more visible role to address this issue.

- For generations, American children grew up with an understanding of the value of forests and nature. Children gained this knowledge in their daily lives, whether as part of their outdoor chores or as part of their outdoor play. Through having the outdoors in their daily lives, they saw the connection of natural resources to their homes and communities. They learned that forests provide clean air and water, habitat for wildlife, hunting, fishing, and recreation opportunities, building materials, and even jobs.
- The American population has shifted from rural settings to metropolitan areas. Over 80 percent of the 300 million Americans live in cities, with fewer connections to rural or natural areas. Many children live in cities and don’t have easy access to parks and natural areas.
- Over the past 40 years, family life has changed as well.

The implications of this growing disconnect with nature are profound.

- This disconnect from nature coupled with a sedentary lifestyle has serious implications for the long-term health and well-being of our Nation’s children. The next generation of children is expected to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.
- Disconnection from nature also translates into a shaky future for sustainable forests and healthy public lands. Any plan to sustain healthy productive ecosystems must ensure that people remain socially connected to them.



Children must understand why forests are valuable so they will grow into citizens who support conservation, and will work towards resolving the challenges associated with climate change and water. The Forest Service must nurture current and new generations out of which conservation leaders can emerge. Alarming, interest in natural resource careers continues to decline. National undergraduate enrollment in natural resource science programs has declined by 40 percent since 1995.

The Forest Service has a tremendous number of ongoing activities to help connect children with nature.

- For over 100 years, we have been providing interpretive services, ranger talks, summer outdoor work opportunities such as the Youth Conservation Corps and Urban Treehouses, and educational programs such as Smokey Bear, Woodsy Owl, and the Natural Inquirer. Employees in State and Private Forestry, Research and Development, and the National Forest System have been actively engaged.
- Last year, more than 4.4 million people were reached through our programs. More than 800 partners leveraged Forest Service investments by 400 percent.
- One of the latest examples of our commitment to reach children is the program “More Kids in the Woods.” Under this program, the Forest Service is working with partners on dozens of projects around the country to get kids out into the forest—face to face with nature, up close and personal.
- The Forest Service is not only going to be taking more kids to the woods, we’re going to be bringing the woods to the kids through programs delivered to more urban citizens. One of our projects actually involved tearing up asphalt and creating downtown green space for kids to enjoy.
- The Forest Service is working with partners to ensure that every child in America, alongside their parents, has the opportunity to personally experience the Great Outdoors, whether in a remote mountain wilderness or in a spot of nature created and protected in the heart of our cities.
- The Forest Service is developing specific program goals and objectives to meet this goal of “Kids in the Woods.” Stay tuned.

For specific facts and references, see *Kids in the Woods Quick Facts*.

Forest Service Mission
Sustain the health, diversity, and productivity
of the Nation’s forests and grasslands
to met the needs of present and future generations.

