

Encouraging kids to develop sense of oneness with nature

BY NANCY MAES
Special to Tribune Newspapers

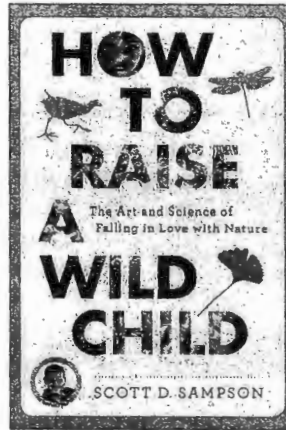
Scott D. Sampson, host of the PBS Kids television series "Dinosaur Train," still has vivid memories of wading in a pond full of bloblike tadpoles when he was 4 or 5 years old. In "How to Raise a Wild Child: The Art and Science of Falling in Love with Nature" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), he writes, "I felt, perhaps for the first time in my life, a deep and ecstatic sense of oneness with nature."

In his book, Sampson, who is vice president of research and collections at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, details how parents can foster that same feeling in their own children. Here is an edited version of our conversation.

Q: You say that experience, mentoring and understanding are the three elements essential for connecting children to nature. Can you elaborate on each one?

A: Experience means firsthand, multisensory outdoor experiences, which evidence shows are far more emotionally and physiologically powerful than indoor experiences. Mentorship is about adults being present to share the experiences and showing that they value nature. Understanding is building the knowledge that everything is interconnected through the flow of energy and matter, and that everything is connected through time.

Q: You write that the best way to connect children with nature changes as they grow up. What are the best ways to help children up to age



6 fall in love with nature?

A: To engender a sense of wildness in toddlers and the older kids, a backyard with a little grass and some rocks is wild enough. The one essential ingredient in early childhood is unstructured nature play, where adults are bystanders and kids can be creative with loose parts like rocks,



Sampson

pine cones and branches. Sticks can be anything — scepters, walking sticks, digging tools. They require the mind to be inventive.

Q: What about 7- to 11-year-olds?

A: In middle childhood, adventures should extend out into the community, but close to home, like an urban stream with a little vegetation or a local park. The brains and bodies of kids this age are more formed, so we need to give them greater freedom and offer them challenges that test their levels of competency, such as going out and collecting something in nature — (for example), picking fruit at a farm or taking photographs.

Q: You write that it's important for families to find a spot close to home to sit regularly and observe nature. Why?

A: The "sit spot" lets you

get to know one place and creates a sense of intimacy. If you sit long enough in a place, you will begin to not just see but sense many things. One of the ways to do this is to listen to the birds because they tell you about the mood of the place and whether or not predators are around. You should go to the sit spot at different times of the day and different times of the year so you start to understand that place almost like it's a friend.

Q: Is it unfair to burden children with the gloom-and-doom scenario of global warming, habitat destruction and species extinction?

A: The key with all of early childhood and part of middle childhood is to give kids amazing experiences in nature to help foster that sense of connectedness. Only after fourth grade do we start to talk about the reality of the bad things going on in the world. We always balance it with things that kids can do to make a difference, whether it be starting a recycling program or removing invasive species, so they get the sense that they have the power to change the world.

Q: How can parents connect teenagers to nature?

A: You have to give teens abundant times in wild places in the company of their peers. Their brains drive them to take risks, so we need to provide them with safe opportunities to do this. It is better if mom and dad are nowhere in sight. Teens will be happier with 20-somethings as supervisors to help them build skills. Teens are ultimately looking to figure out who they are and to create a higher degree of separation with the adult figures in their lives.

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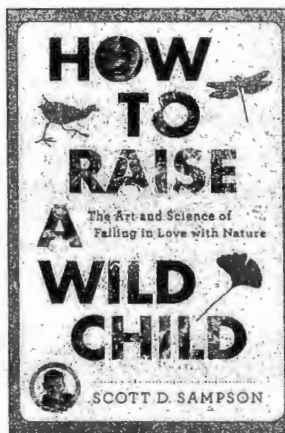
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