

Washington makes strides to get kids outdoors, but we can do more

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Ever since I took part in the Pierce County Environmental Education summit in the spring of 2006, I have sought ways to encourage parents to get their kids into the outdoors.

That's why I was at Crystal Mountain for Thursday's Washington State Watchable Wildlife Conference. I wanted to hear the keynote speaker, Martin LeBlanc.

A Seattle native, LeBlanc admits the outdoors saved him from a life of drugs and alcohol.

At age 16, and described by his father as a "self-indulgent pig," LeBlanc was given a choice: attend military school for a year or an Outward Bound course in Maine.

"At age 16, nature humbled me. I realized the world is bigger than Martin LeBlanc," he said of the outdoors course.

That experience eventually led him to his current roles as the national youth education lead for The Sierra Club and the vice president of the Children and Nature Network.

"This is my passion, it saved my life. I was lucky because I had parents who cared and had the resources to send me somewhere. My goal is to give every child in America that outdoor opportunity," he said.

At one point in his talk, LeBlanc asked if each person had a special outdoors place, a place full of memories and good times. Each of the 90-plus attendees raised a hand.

"Young people who don't have those outdoor experiences, where is their special place? We owe it to the next generation to have special places. I believe it is a crisis we face."

To address that crisis, LeBlanc said government agencies and private groups must overcome four challenges:

1. The fear parents feel for their child's safety, fueled by the constant media coverage of missing-child cases. "They constantly want to know where their children are."
2. Overzealous zoning regulation. "What happened to the tree house? We have zoned communities with rules and regulations that are hurting getting children outdoors."
3. Current school curricula that exclude outdoor education. LeBlanc said even in today's standards-based world of education, field trips and outdoor education programs must be part of a child's education.
4. While recognizing that the Internet and video games "are here to stay," LeBlanc said, parents need to find a happy medium of indoor and outdoor time.

To meet those challenges, LeBlanc said Washington is off to a good start. He cited:

- The new Audubon nature center at Seward Park on the shores of Lake Washington.
- The E3 Washington program led by the Environmental Education Association of Washington to develop a comprehensive statewide environmental education plan.
- The IslandWood outdoor education center for children and adults on Bainbridge Island.
- Passage of the No Child Left Inside bill by the Legislature this spring. It will provide \$1.5 million over three years to get school children outdoors via field trips and classwork.

"Washington is the only state to put funding aside to get children outdoors. Washington can truly be a model for the rest of the nation," he said.

That is a great start. But to me, there was a missing element in LeBlanc's presentation: the parents.

We've heard for years about how important parental involvement is to a child's education. It's no different for the outdoors.

Moms and dads, you have to take the lead. That doesn't mean you have to take your young one on a weekend backpack trip. Start simple and go for free. Go to the Tacoma Nature Center and walk the trails. Check the newspaper for a low tide and go exploring the beach at Titlow Park or the Purdy Spit if you live across the bridge. Go to any one of the area's state parks and let your kids explore among towering trees.

Parents, we need to let our children climb a tree and ponder the meaning of life, watch a slug inch its way across the grass or skip stones on a lake's flat surface. We owe it to them to make that outdoor investment.

All it needs to cost is your time.

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