

Growing environmental education

By REP. DAVE QUALL

My father, the Reverend A.O. Quall, was a famous climbing guide who led hundreds of people to the summit of Mount Baker in the 1920s and '30s. He was an immigrant from Norway who brought his love of nature and outdoor activity with him. He shared that love with his children, all 12 of us.

I grew up following him around the forests of Western Washington. He knew every type of tree and plant and could identify all by name. He had a special fondness for beavers; we would observe them and their dams by the hour. We didn't know about "the environment" in those days. We just loved being outdoors, surrounded by its natural beauty.

Life is different now for children. Instead of playing in the forests, fields and parks, they watch the Animal Planet and Discovery channels for their nature experience. A trip to the zoo may be as close as they ever get to an animal. Richard Louv has written a book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder," that addresses this shift in our relationship with nature.

Most Americans don't understand the natural systems we depend upon for our air, water and food. We must raise our "environmental literacy" rate if we are to meet the growing, complex challenges of natural resource management and globalization.

Last year, I sponsored legislation that established "E3 Washington," which stands for education, environment and economy. E3 Washington is an impressive initiative kicked off in September by co-chairs Gov. Chris Gregoire and former EPA Administrator William Ruckelshaus. It's supported by representatives from business, education, nonprofit and civic groups, tribes, and elected officials. Our goal is to develop local and statewide plans to strengthen and fund environmental education in our schools and communities. There are also very pragmatic reasons for increasing environmental education in our schools. Kids who learn in real-world settings: improve their grades overall; stay in school longer; behave more responsibly; do better on standardized tests; and graduate better prepared for the job market. Environmental education helps children and adults develop knowledge, values and skills to meet present-day needs without compromising the well-being of future generations. And kids who have a hands-on environmental education curriculum do better on WASL tests because these programs incorporate all the skills of reading, writing, math and science that we are testing. Children learn when they are engaged. A great example of local hands-on environmental learning is Mountain School, an educational program developed and run by North Cascades Institute that has served Skagit Valley students since 1989.

My wife, Allene, a retired teacher and very involved grandmother, attended with our granddaughter, Mary. This nationally acclaimed program brings students, teachers and chaperones to North Cascades National Park to learn the natural and cultural history of the mountains.

Recently, E3 Washington's regional summit for Skagit, Whatcom and San Juan counties was held in Burlington, hosted by North Cascades Institute with a keynote address from Pulitzer-prize winner and Anacortes resident William Dietrich.

The summit was attended by teachers, students, business people, farmers, tribal members, community leaders and regular folks who wanted to talk about how to make environmental education a lifelong pursuit.

The all-day summit produced a wide variety of ideas and strategies. Other regional summits will be held around the state with the goal of developing a statewide plan for action.

Check out the Web site www.e3washington.org for all the details. We would like to hear your thoughts as we continue to develop local strategies. Please contact North Cascades Institute with your ideas at info@ncascades.org.

And take your kids for a walk in the woods!

State Rep. Dave Quall has served the 40th District — Skagit, San Juan and southern Whatcom counties — since 1992. He is currently chair of the House Education Committee, which has oversight of K-12 education.

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