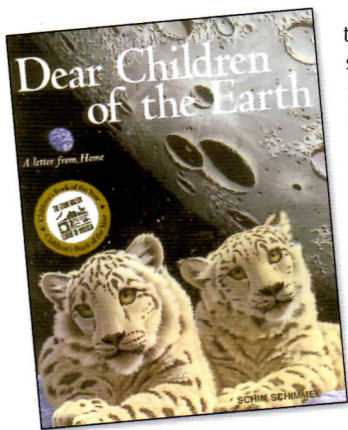


Communing with Nature

Scottsdale mom Sharon Dempt has fond memories of a trip she made to Colorado with her then-7-year-old son, Ryan, and his buddy.

"There was no television and the kids had the best time," Dempt says. "They searched all day for the perfect crystal. They caught butterflies in makeshift nets. They organized a collection of firewood and pine cones for the evening fire. They kept busy the whole time without picking up a single toy."



Unlike Ryan, the only nature some children encounter is the scenery from the car window en route from soccer practice to piano lessons. According to a recent article in the journal *Young Children*, Americans spend more

than 95 percent of their lives indoors and more than 90 percent of the American population lives in urban areas, far removed from wild things and places. It's no wonder children have fewer opportunities to dig holes, jump in puddles, climb trees and sail boats.

In the Valley of the Sun, we have an added challenge: miserably hot weather from April to October. Unlike their cousins and friends "back east," desert children spend most of the summer months indoors. Should this be cause for alarm?

"Yes," say Gary Paul Nabhan and Steven Trimble, authors of *The Geography of Childhood*. The authors view connecting to nature as a healthy, essential part of child development. In their landmark book, Nabhan and Trimble call upon child and environmental psychologists, naturalists and authors to bring children back to nature. They see nature as an opportunity for children to build self-con-

fidence and forge identity in a non-judgmental arena that transcends language and race.

Although children spend some time outdoors at school on the cement jungles we call playgrounds, by the end of high school they will have spent more than 18,000 hours in classrooms preparing for careers indoors. A school district in Atlanta has even "outlawed" recess, regarding outdoor play as more trouble than it is worth.

At the school my children attend, they still have recess. And even though the playground is dominated by state-of-the-art play gyms, many students prefer digging holes in the sand and using rocks to make bug traps in gullies.

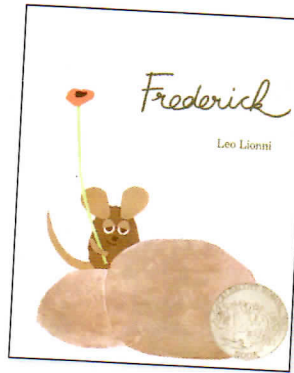
Kids have a special affinity for nature that dissipates if it isn't nurtured. Failing to capitalize on this natural attraction robs a child of an important part of human development. Nature is a vehicle for children to learn self-worth: "I matter because I exist in nature."

Books can be a bridge to nature and no one seems to know that better than popular children's author Jane Yolen. Yolen's list of publishing credits stretches as high as a redwood and yet much of her work creeps up on readers. When I was asked to read Yolen's *Owl Moon* (ages 6-10) with my son's class of second and third graders, I braced myself for what I thought might be a lukewarm reaction from these digital-age kids. To my delight, the children were captivated by this soft story and John Schoenherr's illustrations of a night of owl watching by a parent and child.

Yolen combines poetry

and nature in *Welcome to the Green House* (ages 4-10), illustrated by Laura Regan. The book gracefully begins with "Welcome to the green house. Welcome to the hot house. Welcome to the land of the warm, wet days." It continues to transport readers into the world of the rainforest via words and pictures.

The dreamlike pic-



the Earth (ages 2-10), written and illustrated by Arizona native Schim Schimmel, prompted my 11-year-old to proclaim, "I love this book!" during a bookstore visit last year. Her third grade teacher, who also introduced me to *The Geography of Childhood*, blessed her students by adding this book to her classroom library. The text

of *Dear Children of the Earth* is a letter from Mother Earth that gently prods readers to protect our wonderful world.

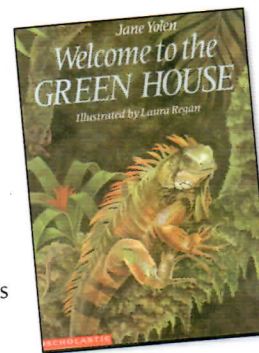
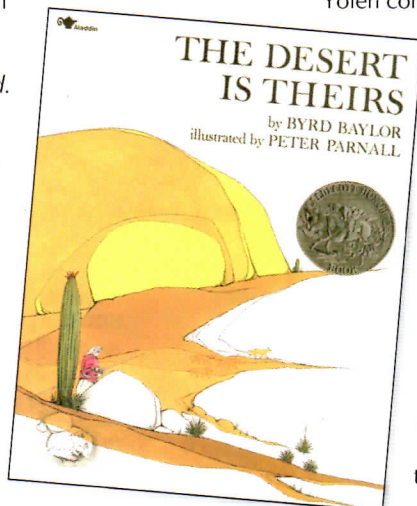
The Smithsonian Institution, concerned about the well-being of our planet, publishes The Smithsonian's Backyard series (ages 4-10). The books, including *Ladybug at Orchard Avenue* and *Screech Owl at Midnight Hollow*, draw readers into the world of wildlife assisted by audiocassettes containing real sounds from nature. The Smithsonian's Oceanic Collection (ages 4-10) presents titles such as *Little Walrus Warning* and *Lobster's Secret*.

Many books on nature that have become classics are available in paperback. Books such as *The Wump World* (ages 4-10) by Bill Peet, *The Lorax* (ages 4-10) by Dr. Seuss, *Frederick* (ages 2-8) by Leo Lionni and *The Desert Is Theirs* (ages 6-10), written by Byrd Baylor and illustrated by Peter Parnall, have been bringing the joys of nature as well as the challenges of its protection into the consciousness of young minds.

A good beginner book for young naturalists is

Touch the Earth (ages 2-8), written by Jane Baskwill and illustrated by Peter Fiore. This new book follows in the traditions of its predecessors by luring the reader into a love of and respect for nature.

Experiencing nature is not a luxury; it's a basic human need. Encourage your children to connect with nature and they will learn to make sense of their world and better understand their place in it.



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