

**Richard Louv Keynote Address
National Cowboy Poetry Gathering 2007
Transcription**

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Charlie Seemann: Good morning.

[laughs]

Our guest speaker had a little trouble getting his plane out of San Diego and various things that followed on that, so when he actually comes up here sort of panting like he's been running to get here to the podium, he has. [laughs]

But welcome. This the twenty-third National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, and we'd like to thank the Nevada Humanities for helping make this keynote address possible, as well as the Humanities Lecture, and – how about a nice hand for those folks?

[audience applauds]

They do this every year, been doing it for a long time. The other thing we like to do on Thursday mornings is to take just a second before we launch into everything else that we do and take a moment to remember folks who have passed during the last year. On the back of your program booklet there's a page called "Empty Saddles," and we'll just mention Alvin Josephy, Fin Bayles, Frank Hansen, Don Walser, and Ernie Fanning who passed this year. We also just got the sad news that the great western swing pioneer Tommy Morrell has passed away in the last couple of days as well, so we'll hold all of them in our thoughts as we go on through the week.

The theme this year is Ranching Culture, and we'll focusing a lot -- in all of our panels and music and poetry -- on the connection between people and the land. Our speaker today will explore some of the ramifications of losing that connection between, with the nature and the land. Richard Louv is a columnist for the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. He's written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and other newspapers and magazines. He's also been a columnist and a member of the editorial board for *Parents Magazine*. He's the author of seven books, most recent being *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder*. So please make welcome Richard Louv.

[audience applauds]

Richard Louv: Thank you. I forgot my hat.

[audience laughs]

The, I was on Earl's van a little while ago -- pardon me? And there was a woman, I assume a poet here on there, and she started talking about children and nature because I was there, and she said that she was found by wolves and raised by wolves, and the howling was a little hard to get over, and so I figured I was, I'm in good company. I told her I was, too.

The reason I was asked to talk to you is not so much specifically about ranching culture, though I have written about and I write a little bit about that in this book, but because of something that I have a sense that, that you all have in common – which is that I would suspect that most of you had some connection to nature when you were kids, and that has something to do with your creativity today; and probably has something to do with your choice of art and the topics that you talk, write about and sing about.

When I was a boy, I lived outside of Kansas City right on the edge of the suburbs. And I could walk out our basement door and through the yard and through a fence and into a cornfield where my underground fort was, and then into the woods and the farms that seemed to go on forever. Those were my woods. I owned those woods. To the extent that I think I pulled out, as an eight-year-old, hundreds of survey stakes that I knew....

[audience applauds]

....had something to do with the bulldozers that were taking out other woods. And I did -- I had a big stack behind the hedge and my parents asked me about that and I said those were swords.

[audience laughs]

So I can't see all of you, but how many here pulled out survey stakes when you were kids?

[audience laughs]

There you go, see? I hereby induct you into the Secret Society of Stake Pullers. In fact, you are stakeholders in that society. I often tell that story and elaborate on it, and I told that story a few months ago in Albuquerque where I was speaking to a very interesting group called the Quivira Coalition, which some of you may know about. It's an effort to bring conservationists and ranchers together in the West, and I think it's particularly in New Mexico, but they're representatives throughout the West. And there were about five hundred people in the audience, half of them were wearing cowboy hats – and I think there's more here wearing cowboy hats -- well, I can't really see them. I guess you were polite; you took them off. But there, they were wearing them. And I told that story, and after the speech, during the question and answer period, a rancher stood up and he was the real deal. His jeans were not acid-washed. He had a big, white handlebar mustache

like some of the folks I've seen here, and sunburned and big plastic-rimmed glasses.

And he said, "You know that story you told about pulling out stakes?"

And I said, "Yes."

And he said, "When I was a boy, I did that, too." And then he began to cry in front of five hundred people, half of whom had cowboy hats on. And he was deeply embarrassed, but he continued to talk despite that embarrassment, in front of five hundred people, half of whom were wearing cowboy hats. And he said that he felt such a deep sense of grief that his might be one of that last generations to have *that* kind sense of ownership of land, *that* kind of sense of connection to land.

A little while later I was signing books and a woman came up -- and she was a rancher, too. She was younger than he was -- I think she was in her late forties, early fifties -- and she said, "You know that story about you told about pulling out stakes?"

And I says, "Yes," and she says, "I did that, too, but I did it different. I did it from my horse when I was a little girl, and I would ride my horse, and my horse got so used to me pulling out stakes, that it started taking me over to the stakes to pull out those stakes."

[audience laughs]

Now, probably like that, that, the woman and the rancher in his sixties who spoke, I had a deep sense of attachment to *my* woods. Now, I couldn't have told you that my woods were connected to any other woods ecologically. I had no sense that -- I knew nothing about acid rain or global warming, of course, we didn't call it that then. I had real no sense of global environment, environmentalism. So today, kids can tell you just about everything about global warming or the Amazon rain forest. But generally what they can't tell you about is the last time they went out in a field or the woods and just watched the leaves move. That connection, that intimate connection to with nature is disappearing and the relationship between children and nature, I believe over the last thirty years at an accelerating pace, has reversed. So as they said, they can tell you a lot about what they've seen on National Geographic specials they've seen on television and what they've learned in school about ecology, but they don't have that kind of sense of intimacy with nature.

Increasingly, nature is a t-shirt, you know? It's an otter on a t-shirt, it's a consumer item, it's something you watch on television, it's an abstraction. You know, how many commercials have you seen now with the -- there's actually an ad where there's an SUV racing along a mountain stream, and in the back are the kids who are watching a flip-down screen, a picture of nature on that screen as they're racing along the stream. And that's pretty much the relationship between children and nature. Now, in this book I will plead guilty to having a sense of nostalgia about my woods, but I really don't think this is an exercise in nostalgia. When you think about it, for all of human history and pre-history, children went outside and either played or worked in nature. And within a matter of a few years, we're seeing the virtual disappearance of that.

Now, it's not too late, and I want to talk about that more later. There is a kind of

movement building over the last year around the country and it's very hopeful, to return kids to a connection to nature. Before I go on, let me just read a page from the book to give you just a sense of why I think that nature is so important for kids.

"If, when we were young, we tramped through forests of Nebraska cottonwoods or raised pigeons on a rooftop in Queens or fished for Ozark bluegills, or felt the swell of a wave that traveled a thousand miles before lifting our boat, then we were bound to the natural world and remain so today. Nature still informs our years, lifts us, carries us. For children, nature comes in many forms: a newborn calf, a pet that lives and dies, a worn path through the woods, a fort nestled in stinging nettles, a damp mysterious edge of a vacant lot. Whatever shape nature takes, it offers each child an older, larger world separate from parents. Unlike television, nature does not steal time, it amplifies it. Nature offers healing for a child living in a destructive family or neighborhood. It serves as a blank slate upon which a child draws and reinterprets the culture's fantasies. Nature inspires creativity in a child by demanding visualization, and the full use of the senses.

Given a chance, a child will bring the confusion of the world to woods, wash it in the creek, turn it over to see what lives on the unseen side of that confusion. Nature can frighten a child, too, and this fright serves a purpose. In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy -- a place distant from the adult world. A separate peace. These are some of the utilitarian values of nature, but on a deeper level, nature gives itself to children for its own sake, not as a reflection of a culture. At this level, inexplicable nature provokes humility."

In a classroom at Southwood Junior High -- Southwood Grade School, where I went to grade school in Raytown, Missouri -- I interviewed some kids a few years ago. This was one of the few schools I visited all across the country -- and this was for a previous book where I interviewed almost three thousand parents and kids, usually in groups. This is one of the only places where I saw that kids were still going outside into nature, and this is about fifteen years ago, actually.

And there was a little girl in the room and she was a poet. She described herself as a poet. She said -- she had this beautiful line -- she said, "When I'm in the woods, I feel that I'm in my mother's shoes." And she described her secret place in the woods, it was a hollow underneath a tree, and she had her blanket under there, and she would go down to this secret spot, and she would lie down on her blanket and look up at the leaves and the branches and listen to the wind, and think her poetry aloud. And she told me one day, she went down and her spot was gone, the bulldozers had come. And she said it was as if they had cut down part of her -- that was her line.

I don't think we know what we do to kids when we take nature away from them. Now, it's not just development patterns that are doing this -- and by the way, the proof of this division between children and nature is not based on great longitudinal studies comparing the 1940s to the '50s to '70s to '80s and so on, because no one thought to ask the question, because we always assumed this relationship would be ongoing forever. So we don't have those kind of longitudinal studies. In fact, we've studied how, just about how

everything else affects child development except nature until recently – until about the last decade.

What we do know is a lot of circumstantial evidence and we have an awful lot of anecdotal evidence, but the circumstantial evidence is persuasive. We pretty much know what most American kids are doing with their time, depending on what survey you look at, it's about forty-four hours a week that children are plugged into some kind of electronic medium, more and more time doing homework that has accelerated greatly. More and more time, as I said, in the back of the van to the play date with the flip down screen. More and more time in very, very scheduled activities.

Now, one would think that this split between children and nature was only an urban or suburban phenomenon; it's not. The great of, the rate of child obesity, which is one of the symptoms of this -- the rate of child obesity is growing twice as fast in rural areas in America as it is in urban and suburban areas. They're watching the same video games, they're watching the same television, and they're just being driven longer distances to their play dates. Now, that has to do with the change in farm life and ranch life. Obviously, there are pockets. There is still a great connection between children and nature in places, certain places in the country. But even in Ukiah, California, where I visited recently, which is a small town up in northern California. That is Spotted Owl central, that area -- the kids aren't going outside there, either. Which raises an interesting question: Is it the Spotted Owl that is the leading indicator species, or is it something else? I think it is the human child in nature who is the leading indicator species -- the human child who is not in nature, because if children are not going out and bonding to the natural world, who in the world is going to care about the Spotted Owl in ten or fifteen years, or any other endangered species?

The studies of conservations show that almost to a person they had some kind of transcendent experience in nature when they were kids. What happens if we take that away? What happens if future generations of kids have less and less contact with nature? Where will future stewards of the Earth come from? Well, where will the stewards or your poetry come from without that connection to nature?

Now, there is good news, though. As I said within the last ten years, there has been a lot of studies, there have been a lot of studies that have been released that have been really interesting, that show that connection to nature is essential for, perhaps essential for healthy child development. Has a profoundly positive impact on children's health, on their cognition, on their physical health, on their mental health -- I believe also on their spiritual health.

For instance, the University of Illinois has been doing an ongoing set of studies on attention span with children, has found that just a little bit of it, of nature, lengthens children's attention span, has a very positive effect, for instance, on the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder. Now, Attention Deficit Disorder's a controversial term. We're not entirely sure what it is. The people who did these studies at the University of Illinois are not suggesting that we do away with the other two, the two traditional

medications or therapies for Attention Deficit Disorder, which are behavioral modification and Ritalin and other stimulants. They're not suggesting we do away with those, but they are suggesting that nature therapy be added, because of the effect that they're seeing on inner city kids in Chicago, who have just a little bit of association with nature, their symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder get much better.

Now the people who are doing those studies who suggest that nature therapy be added to the therapies to ADD. In the book, I turn that around a little bit, I agree with them, but I ask this question: could it be that at least some of the huge increase in the number of kids who are being diagnosed with the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder, could it be that at least some of that increase might have to do with the fact that we took nature away from kids in the first place? Could it be that at least some of the huge increase in the amount of, number of kids who are being prescribed anti-depressants in even as young as pre-school – which we now know is very bad for them -- could it be that at least some of that increase might have to do with the fact that we took nature away from kids in the first place? We now know, because of the studies that have been done, the profoundly positive effect on stress levels that being outside in nature has on kids and on adults. Could that have something to do with the high suicide rate of teenagers? Because other than television and electronic medium, there isn't as much that has changed very much as that disconnection with nature for children in the last few decades.

I often say that as a kid, nature was my Ritalin; I'm sure that I would have been placed on some sort of drug of some sort. I got, I got diagnosed in third grade, they sent me to special ed classes in third grade because I mumbled. My wife says I still need those classes because I mumble, but....

[audience laughs]

And I remember hiding in the stairwell when they would send me for those two hours everyday. I never went to that class. I had this secret place where I hid in that school, at Southwood. So I often say that nature was my Ritalin. I remember what it did for me. I believe it saved me in many ways. I have, I had loving parents who loved nature, my father had some difficulties, some severe difficulties, and I could always, though, go find my fishing rod and walk down the hill. I could always go out into the woods, and when I interviewed kids, I hear, I heard that over and over again that they could leave a house where there was something traumatic going on, and they could go to the woods or a field, and they would come back more forgiving than when they left. I heard that over and over again.

In terms of the effect on creativity, we also know that that connection to nature affects children's creativity. Studies of play areas where, natural play areas where there are trees and bushes and grass and greenery, versus the flat, boring playgrounds, the play areas that are made of asphalt or, or turf -- the kids on the natural playgrounds, in study after study, play far more creatively, are far more likely to invent their own games, and interestingly, play more cooperatively than the kids on the flat, boring playgrounds. One of the studies looked at which kids emerge as leaders in these two environments. The

kids who emerged as leaders on the flat, boring playgrounds were the physically strongest. The kids who emerged as leaders on the natural playgrounds, play areas, were the smartest.

That suggests to me, at least that if we really care about bullying on the playgrounds, then maybe what we ought to do is green all the playgrounds. Studies on cognition, in learning, in the, in the 1990s a series of studies were done of schools that had outdoor classrooms, and an emphasis placed on taking kids outside to learn in nature. The kids in those schools did better across the board from social studies to standardized testing -- standardized tests. A study released about a year and a half ago from the Department of Education in California looked at three school districts where there was still some sort of immersion programs where kids would go out in nature for a week or so. The kids in those settings did twenty-seven percent better on science testing than children in the standard classrooms. Again, this has a profound effect on us, on adults, too. There's far more research, by the way, on adults than there are on children.

Many of these studies were done, were inspired by a theory called the Biophilia Hypothesis by E.O. Wilson at Harvard. And the Biophilia Hypothesis as he describes it is, that as human beings we have an inner attraction, we are wired to be attracted to other forms of life, to nature. Essentially what he is saying is that biologically, we're all hunters and gathers; we've not changed biologically. And that there is something in us that we don't understand that needs to be in the natural world from time to time, and that when we don't get that, we don't do so well. The studies that emerged that, they looked for instance at people in hospital settings, and showed that the people who had a view out their window of a natural landscape got well quicker than the people who had a view of manmade landscape. There's been a lot of studies on this and this is not crystal theory, this is real science.

If this is true, if the Biophilia Hypothesis is true, it's kind of like riding a bike. It's in us, we are wired. And it's not too late, it's never too late. That can be stunted by a lack of access to nature when we are kids, but it can come back. I tell this story in the book about going to some gang members to a nature preserve near where I live in San Diego. And these guys were tough guys, these guys were in their late teens and early twenties, and they had uniforms on. I think they were the job, urban corps or something like that, and they were taken up there to cut trails. And these were gang members. They were about eight feet tall and covered with tattoos and, and...

[audience laughs]

In the early morning, when they got there and I was with them, I witnessed something that the people who work in these kinds of programs see all the time. These tough guys were scared to death of the woods. One of the toughest of the tough said, "It's too noisy out here."

I said, "What are you talking about?! You know, you come from a neighborhood where you can hear gunfire in the background."

And he said, "No, no. There's four or five noises in my neighborhood and I know what

they all mean." [He] says, "Out here, there's hundreds of noises and I don't know what they mean and out here they seem to mean something."

As I watched these guys, as they worked in nature, the flat affect fell from their face, the cynicism went from their eyes. By the end of the day, these were eight year olds jumping over a creek. The nature brought out their true nature. Now it's not a panacea, but anyone who works in these kinds of programs sees the effect that nature has on children. And some of the toughest kids, some of the most problematic kids are the ones who respond the best.

Why is this split happening? Now the obvious reason that people will give is that it's all the video games and television, and that's true, but I think it's too easy to blame the electronic world. I'm not a Luddite, I love my Macintosh, my wife will tell you I love my Macintosh too much. My kids had video games, my boys are now nineteen and twenty-four. I think that, that is, submission to the electronic world is more of a symptom than it is the cause. Certainly, it is seductive. But as I interviewed parents around the country, the underbelly emerged of this issue: I think the true reason that under girds so much of this is fear.

We live in a state of fear in this country today. The thing that these parents talked about the most is that they are scared to death to let their kids out because of stranger danger. Now what's interesting about that is that when you look at the statistics, it doesn't add up. The actual rate of kidnappings, traditional, threat kidnappings, the kind where kids are either hurt or killed -- as tragic as that is -- that rate is either flat over the last twenty years or is falling, depending on what study you look at. There's only about a hundred of those classic kidnappings a year in the United States. The vast majority of child snatches are by relatives, somebody the family knows, and yet we are terrified of strangers. I was scared of strangers raising my boys. I knew better, I knew about the statistics and I still was afraid. And my boys did not have the free range childhood that I did. But I was very intentional, as was my wife, about getting our kids out into nature. We lived on a canyon, we made sure they had a place to play down below, we did watch out for them a lot more than my parents watched out for me. I also took them fishing a lot, I took them hiking a lot, we still do that a lot. So it had to be very intentional, but I too felt that fear.

The problem here is that as we allow that fear to shape our lives, we have stopped thinking in terms of comparative risk. And by that I mean I'm not saying that there are not strangers out there that can hurt our kids. I'm not saying that there are not dangers in nature, because increasingly by the way, parents fear nature itself. So do kids. There is risk out there, but there are also great risks in raising a large part of a generation and an even larger part of the next in virtual house arrest: danger to their psychological health, to their sense of connection to the Earth, to their sense of ownership and attachment to land, to their sense of community. To their physical health -- if we really want to talk about real risk, we ought to talk about child obesity. Pediatricians are now saying that this generation of children today that may be the first generation since World War II to die at an earlier age than their own parents because of the rise of childhood obesity. Years from now, many of the kids today are going to get diabetes, they are going to have heart

problems, et cetera, because we protected them so well, because we kept them from going outside in the woods, or even playing in the backyard as many parents now do.

Yes there is risk in nature itself, but one of the things I like to tell parents is that the most dangerous spider in America lives in your closet. It's called the Brown Recluse, and I did some research on this and one of the favorite places for Brown Recluse spiders to hide is in the jeans and the clothes that are left on the bedroom floor. I tried that on my sons.

[audience laughs]

It didn't work. Pediatricians now talk about the fact that they don't see many broken bones in kids. That used to be a rite of passage. I bet most of us have broke a bone as kids, playing outdoors, falling out of a tree, whatever. But what pediatricians now say is that while they don't see many broken bones, what they are seeing is a lot of repetitive stress injuries in kids from computers and video games. Repetitive stress injuries typically last far longer can last decades than the typical broken bone. Again: comparative risk.

The, some of the ways that this fear is permeating our society also accelerates the disconnection between children and nature, and some of these are unexpected. I expected, for instance, when I talked to parents to say that access to nature was the number one reason -- it was on the list, but it was down the list, and by that I mean, you know, once they torn down my woods, it was pretty tough for kids to go out in to those woods. That's true. But if you go to the new edge of Kansas City today, where the woods are right there, right behind the houses, just like mine were, kids aren't going out in the woods either. It's partly because of fear, but that fear again... early in the book I talk about the criminalization of natural play. If you begin to add up all the rules and regulations from federal to state to local, etc., many of the well intended and probably needed restrictions on picking up horned toads -- in terms of the environmental restrictions -- and then you add to all of that the huge increase in covenants and restrictions -- the CC and Rs, as they're called -- that have been placed on almost every new housing development in America in the last thirty-five years. These are the rules that, you know, mandate that your house will be beige for decades, that, you know, they control the color of your curtain liners, whether or not you can plant a rose bush, let alone a vegetable garden in the front yard. They're literally people that have had liens put on their houses or their condos because they've hung American flags outdoors, off a balcony. These kinds of rules, these CC and Rs, have really permeated the newest suburbs all across the country. And again, they are enforced in varying degrees, but the message gets through and the message is that playing outdoors in is the past, nature's in the past, probably doesn't count anymore, and that playing outside is illicit and probably illegal. That's the subconscious message that probably gets through. I mean, just try putting up a basketball hoop in some of these neighborhoods, let alone let the kids build a tree house or a fort.

One woman came up to me and said that her association had recently outlawed chalk drawing on the sidewalks. Which leads to cocaine.

[audience laughs]

You know, you always have to be careful. You know, one of the things I think that I've learned -- I tell people that as a journalist, I think that as journalists we all ought to be required to be interviewed and be written about, you know, before we actually start practicing journalism. So we know what it's like to be on the other side. You always have to be careful. One reporter quoted me on that as if I was serious. It was a big paper, too, so.... "Leads to cocaine."

This also permeates our institutions like our schools. In Broward County, Florida, a few months ago the school district there, big school district started putting up no running signs on the playgrounds. This is happening. At Broward, when I spoke in Florida recently, a woman stood up in the audience and said, "At what point did we go crazy? At what point did we lose our minds?"

I said, "That's a very good question."

The social pressure on parents now not to let their kids go outdoors is pretty stark often. I was interviewed by someone here on the radio, on a radio program in Salt Lake in preparation for this, this conference. And a call, a person called in and said that someone had, their kids were walking from school through the woods and one of the neighbors called and reported them for child neglect, the family for child neglect. That same woman who stood up and said, "At what point did we lose our minds?" came up to me later and said that, that she and her husband had moved to a place that had woods behind the house and they deliberately wanted to live there so that the kids could go out and play in the woods and the kids were going out there and doing that, and one of the neighbor ladies came over and knocked on their door, and the neighbor lady said, "What are you doing? Your kid is out there?"

And the woman said, "Well, they're playing out there in the woods."

"Well, why are they doing that?"

"Well because it's good for them. It's good for their health, and all that..."

And the neighbor got so exasperated, she said, "You're such a liberal!"

Which is really kind of the strangest definition of a liberal that I've heard: someone who lets their kids go outside and play.

So there is some good news. Part of the good news is, as I said, is this body of knowledge now, which is very encouraging about just how good nature is for kids' health. And I've experienced over the last year and a half, that as parents learn about that, they want to get their kids out there then. This is good for their physical health, good for their mental health, good for their spiritual health, et cetera, et cetera. It's good for their sense of wonder.

The most important word, I think in this issue is wonder. How many of us remember when we were three or four, going outside maybe on our hands and knees on the grass, and turning over a rock and finding for the first time that we are not alone in the universe. And that sense of wonder and awe that we felt, listening to wind in trees, like that little

poet that I described. How can we take that away from kids?

I worried when I was writing the book that a chapter at the end would give me some grief. It was about the spiritual necessity of nature for children. There are many folks in the country who worry about someone like me coming and telling their kids to worship nature. They suspect that I might do that, or people like me. I have respect for conservative Christians who believe that. Some conservative Christians believe that. I have a conservative Christian friend who I asked to read that chapter because I wanted to write respectfully. She read it and she's quoted in it. I still worried that I would get some difficulty from the Christian right, or certain elements in it. It hasn't emerged.

One of the earliest champions for the books was the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He wrote a glowing review, and had me on his radio show, and I kept waiting for the ambush. I didn't come. I was asked to talk to about a thousand or fifteen hundred people at the Christian Camping Association's conference this year. I think among smart religious people of whatever denomination of brand, I think that there is an intuitive understanding that all spiritual life begins with a sense of wonder. And what is one of the first windows into wonder we have as children? It's turning over that rock and finding that we are not alone in the universe.

There is great self-interest at stake. I spoke at the Outdoor Industry Association's Conference in Salt Lake about a year ago, and the reason they asked me to speak is that they are looking at their sales, they're looking at their numbers. They're still doing a very good business, they're selling a lot of high-end gear to yuppies and baby boomers that stays in the garage most of the time, but what they're not selling very much of is entry level gear. And so they are quite concerned. They're looking at their numbers and they're saying they're healthy now, but what's going to happen in ten or fifteen years. And they think this disconnection between children and nature have part, may be partly responsible. They need to take it seriously.

I've spoken several times and visited the National Conservation Training Center, which is all the federal conservation agencies send their folks through that in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. The reason they are concerned is that they are looking, starting this year, at an exodus of baby boomers from the federal conservation agencies. A very large number of people are going to start retiring and they're looking at the numbers and wondering who's going to replace them? They're having trouble finding people who care about these issues professionally. So it's in their interest to care about this. It's in the interest, as I said, of the faith-based organizations. If they care about a sense of wonder, they will care about this, and many of them do.

It's in the interest of the National Parks. The National Parks as some of you have read have begun to notice a dramatic drop in attendance. Now some of that can be explained by they've hiked the fees at the National Parks, et cetera. But primarily what this is evidence of, I believe, is this disconnection between children and nature. The forest, the park rangers now talk about windshield camping. Camping itself is falling off. Windshield camping is when people drive through. And so when you look at the political

implications of that, who in the world is going to support National Parks in the future? Teddy Roosevelt's dream. Who is going to support that? Teddy Roosevelt himself grew up with that kind of connection to nature. He couldn't see very well, so his senses, his hearing developed tremendously and he could name hundreds of bird calls as a child. There's a great passage where he brings home a giant snapping turtle and ties it to the leg of the table in the kitchen, and demands that the cook cook it. And she threatened to quit. That snapping turtle probably has a direct connection to the fact that we have National Parks today; that sense of connection. Now who is going to carry on that tradition?

There is great self-interest at stake in terms of ranching culture. The rancher who stood up in Albuquerque and wept because he worried that his might be one of the last generations to have that sense of attachment to land. He was not only talking about nature, he was talking about the culture that he had been raised in. That is also at stake.

Across the country, though, as I said earlier, there is a movement now emerging. Twenty-two cities have either started, or either launched or are planning some kind of campaign to get kids reconnection to nature. These are usually regional campaigns that transcend borders but are geographically based. In Cincinnati, for instance, next week I'm going there. They have a hall that holds three thousand people and they're going to turn out enough people to fill the hall. The Cincinnati Enquirer has gotten behind this, the Junior League, churches, nature centers, a zoo, et cetera, et cetera., have climbing on board. There's something peculiar about this issue that brings people together who don't usually get in the same room.

Last summer we had a conference at the National Conservation Training Center, in Shepherdstown focused specifically on this issue, and invited three hundred and fifty leaders from all over the country who came. We deliberately looked for a variety of leaders from different cultures and different geographic regions, different professions. They usually, some of them, don't get in the same room; developers were there, for instance. Developers have gotten interested in this. Not long after the book came out I got an email from a developer who said he had just finished the book. And this, this guy is vice president and COO of, or I'm sorry, the founder and COO of the largest privately owned residential development company in the country. He said he just finished the book and he found himself profoundly disturbed by it. Which, as someone who pulled out a lot of stakes I had some pleasure in hearing.

[audience laughs]

But then he went on to say that he wanted to do something about this. So he invited me to Phoenix to an envisioning, where they brought fifty or sixty -- I think it was about eighty, actually -- developers and real estate marketers together.

And he asked me to give my sermonette, and I did and I expected to be chased out of the room. And instead, he stood up and said, "Okay, I want you all to go into small groups and then solve the problem: how are we going to build developments in the future that actually connect kids to nature. The room filled with noise, happy noise. These people

were excited. They got, went off to their corners and were thinking this through and they came back and reported, some of the ideas that they reported were fairly practical, like leave some land in the first place, a good place to start. Other ideas were, maybe we can have nature trails through the development to the surrounding schools and kids could stand there kind of like crossing guards, except they'd be nature guides with their cell phones. There were a lot of ideas and the quality of these ideas to me didn't matter as much as the fact that they had these ideas in the first place. These were developers. Now if that can happen in that room, of developers and real estate marketers, I think that there is great hope.

The new Secretary of the Interior, Dirk Kempthorne, has taken this issue on. He spoke at the conference I spoke about in Shepherdstown. He is now dedicated -- he's only going to be secretary for two years -- but he said this is his cause. So new programs are starting in the federal agencies, the National Forest Service is going to start a program called "More Kids in the Woods," but as I say, the real action here is not in the government, it's at the regional level. It's these, all these associations from junior league to the private businesses to the nature center, who are banding together to say we are going to turn this around. It won't look the same as it was in the fifties. I'm not pretending that we can go back to the fifties. I think the fear is not going to go away. That means two things: that means as parents, as grandparents, as poets, we're going to have to become very intentional about taking kids into nature ourselves. The second thing that it means is that we are going to have to be very intentional about supporting the agencies and the organizations that help parents do that, because parents, particularly young parents -- many of whom did not have that experience themselves -- don't know where to start. Once they learn about the benefits of this to their kids' health, they want to do it.

There are two lists on the refrigerator door for parents -- two metaphorical lists. One list is all the things that we feel we must do, we should do to be good parents. The other list is all the things we'd like to do as good parents, to be good parents. We never quite get done with the should list, and so we feel guilty. We never quite get to the second list. Nature, if it's anywhere on the refrigerator door, is on that second list. I believe that we can -- and as long as it's on that second list, it won't be taken seriously. It'll be seen as an extracurricular activity. I believe that nature time is not leisure time, it's development time. If the culture can understand that, I believe we can move nature to the first list. The first list changes over time, it's not set in stone. Remember flash cards used to be on the first list. Culturally, it's not there anymore. We can put nature on the first list. But this has to be a cultural change, and I've likened it to the anti-smoking campaign, whatever one thinks about that, it worked politically and culturally. We can take strength from past movements. And I think this is, I think, a movement -- on Thanksgiving, USA Today called it the "Children in Nature" movement on their front page story.

Finally, in ending, I think we need to think about how we talk to the next generation about the future of the environment. I spoke at a high school, I was asked to speak at a high school a few months ago near where I live, and I didn't want to do it, because I was tired, I'd been on the road. And then I started thinking about it, and I'd written this book about kids, and I started feeling guilty, so I went and I did it, and I expected twenty kids,

and there were two hundred kids -- they were given extra credit.

[audience laughs]

And I spoke for an hour, and you could have heard a pin drop. And it's not because I'm a great speaker, I'm not. I wander around as you can tell. It was because of something else, that you couldn't, you could have heard a pin drop.

I talked about two things: I talked about the fact that nature is connected to their health, to these students' health. It's not an abstraction: their health. The second thing I talked about was the fact that because of climate change, because of all these major environmental issues that we face, everything in the next forty years must change. We'll need new kinds of agriculture. It's already beginning. We'll need new kinds of energy sources -- already beginning. We'll need new kinds of urban design and architecture. It's already beginning with green urbanism and biophilic design, et cetera. Everything must change in the next forty years because of these challenges. That's a great thing for a kid in high school to hear.

We're actually going to need a new civilization. Every generation of young, of teenagers, wants to build a new civilization, but what we've been telling these kids -- and my profession is most guilty about this -- the news media has been essentially saying for about ten years is that it's too late, because of global warming, et cetera, that the game's over. And then we wonder why kids don't want to suit up for the game. But when you frame it as great opportunity that everything must change, and whole new careers will emerge that don't even have a, have a name yet, those kids' eyes that are fairly deadened when somebody comes in and talks to them about global warming -- as the biology teacher who invited me said -- those eyes light up when you begin to talk in those terms.

After those kids left from that auditorium, I was kind of stunned by how attentive they'd been. I turned to the biology teacher and I said, "What was that all about? Why were they so attentive?"

He said, "It's easy: you said something hopeful about the future of the environment. The never hear that, ever." Now, they do now and then, but the dominant message getting through to these kids is that it's over.

I should have listened more carefully to my own son who at the time was eighteen. He was starting to say some interesting things. He was saying, "You know, Dad, how they sliced off all those hills across the lake and they put cheap housing developments up there, you know? Maybe that's okay, because you know, that's nature, too. They're made out of wood, and that's nature, too, isn't it?"

And I said, "That's a really interesting conversation to have, Matthew. We should have that." And he kept saying things like that and I finally said, "Matthew, what's going on?" Now, my son is a committed fly fisher. I knew he had the fishing gene when he was three when I caught him fishing in the humidifier.

[audience laughs]

So this kid loves nature. But he was starting to say these kinds of strange things, and I said, "Matthew, what's going on?"

And this is a direct quote. "Dad, every time I think about nature being destroyed, it's too painful to think about. It's too painful to think about."

So my own son was beginning to rationalize and construct a worldview that would cause him less pain, to accept that destruction. He has since turned around, he has now discovered birding, he is now at Evergreen College in Washington. He found the only college in America where you can actually fly fish for salmon from campus.

[audience laughs]

He's got his priorities straight. But I should have listened to him. I think we are in danger of scaring a whole generation of kids about the future of the environment, to the extent that they are disassociating from nature itself. And that's on top of the physical disconnection to nature. We can turn this around. You can turn this around through your art, through your words, through the power of what you sing and what you say. You can reach that little girl who had her special place in the woods, where she would go down and find her blanket and watch the leaves move and sing her poetry to herself. You can reach that little girl. She is sitting among you. This is what you can do. Thank you.

[audience applauds]

Charlie Seemann: Thank you, Richard!