

Toward a sustainable future

by Traci Price and Peter Buckley, guest opinion

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We have all read and heard reports on depleted fish stocks, declining forest health and degraded rivers and streams. We have also heard of the many efforts and significant investments made to address these issues - from improving fish habitat or promoting restoration-based forestry to bettering agricultural practices. What has received much less discussion is protecting these investments tomorrow.

While serious, the environmental challenges we have now will pale in comparison to those ahead -- and only by engaging our children in their education will we provide the building blocks for a generation of thoughtful stewards of these investments and their own environment. As with most long-term issues, education provides the best insurance policy.

Preparing our youth for these mounting challenges has become complicated in an age largely disconnected from the natural world. Our nation's youth spend far less time outside than their parents did when they were young. In fact, from 1997 to 2003, the percentage of children in the United States ages 9 to 12 engaging in outdoor activities declined by 37 percent, while obesity rates have soared. And with ongoing school budget cuts, we can only expect kids to spend even less time outdoors while at school.

Aside from fresh air, the natural world provides an applied learning platform without parallel.

The challenging environmental inheritance we will give the next generation ought to at least come with the tools needed to deal with it. This starts by connecting them to their local surroundings.

We can begin this process by passing No Oregon Child Left Inside -- NOCLI. NOCLI will help our youth develop the knowledge and skills they will need to devise creative solutions to complex natural resources challenges. NOCLI will build a framework to support our youth reconnecting with local forests, backyard streams, local landowners and nearby rivers. NOCLI will establish a state environmental literacy plan that will ensure that every student will graduate as an environmentally literate citizen.

This will also position Oregon to receive pending grant monies under Title II and Title V through federal No Child Left Inside legislation. Oregon students will receive all of these benefits without creating new educational mandates or taking existing funding away from current educational programs and efforts.

With a growing list of more than 65 diverse organizations representing almost 80,000 Oregonians, the NOCLI Coalition has worked to draft and introduce the bill in the current legislative session. From those concerned about education and the environment to organizations with health and business interests, the NOCLI Coalition knows that creating a sustainable future in Oregon means action today. We must cultivate our youth to become ecological problem solvers -- for these will become future community problem-solvers. To adequately prepare students and give them what they need for their job in the future is a task for all Oregonians today.

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