

Gila Conservation Education Center



The Gila Conservation Education Center is a coalition of groups, government agencies, businesses, schools and community members who actively participate in natural resource conservation. The Gila Conservation Education Center plays an important role in promoting environmental literacy in the Grant County area through our interpretive Educational Trunks program, our annual Children's Water Festival held at the Gila River, classroom Outdoor Days, and other community events. We recently completed the first stages of two outdoor classrooms, and are currently working with the New Mexico Environment Department to develop and implement an Education and Outreach Plan for the EPA funded La Cienega de San Vicente Wetland Restoration Project located along San Vicente Creek within the Town of Silver City. We have realized these exceptional achievements with limited staff thanks to numerous volunteers, office space provided by the Gila National Forest, and funding from grants and private donations. In 2010, we reached 3250 students with our programs, and volunteers donated 3861 hours of their time! We want to take this opportunity to thank the many of you who have helped to make our educational programs a success, and we still need your help!

In 2005, the term "nature-deficit disorder" was coined by author Richard Louv in his seminal book *Last Child in the Woods*. Nature-deficit disorder is not a medical condition but a description of the human costs of alienation from nature. This alienation damages not only children, but adults, families, and

communities. Consider the 2005 report published by the National Environmental Education & Training Foundation (NEETF). This report found that nationwide, overall awareness of simple environmental topics is reasonably high, but public comprehension of environmental subjects is limited. The average American adult, regardless of age, income, or level of education, fails to grasp essential aspects of environmental science, important cause/effect relationships, or even basic concepts such as runoff pollution, power generation, or water flow patterns. For example:

- The NEETF report found that 73% of Americans incorrectly believe that their electricity comes from clean energy sources (hydro, nuclear or solar), but in reality, most electricity in the United States is produced through the burning of coal. Coal burning is the single largest source of air pollution in the US.
- The NEETF/Roper report found that 45 million Americans incorrectly think that the ocean is a source of drinking water.

Surprisingly, there is little difference in environmental knowledge levels between the average American and those who sit on governing bodies, town councils, and in corporate board rooms whose decisions often have wide ramifications on the environment (NEETF, 2005). Furthermore, recent examinations of the state of environmental literacy found that a small percentage of the public are prepared for the complex environmental issues and decisions of the future. At least part of this shortfall is due to the status of environmental education in the classroom, but the other part may stem from the fact that today, adults and children simply do not spend time outdoors. According to a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control, today's children spend 90 percent of their lives indoors with 23 percent participating in no physical activity, and these numbers are even higher for adults.

Louv (2005) linked some of the most disturbing childhood trends, including the rise in childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder, and depression to the lack of time children spend outdoors. Since 2005, several studies have been published supporting Louv's hypothesis, showing that time outdoors positively influenced children. For example, children who spent time outside were more likely to be physically active and less obese than children who did not spend time outdoors (Cleland *et. al* 2008, Hinkley *et. al* 2008). Taylor and Kuo (2008) showed that children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were better able to concentrate after spending time outdoors, and a study by The American Institutes for Research found that at-risk students involved in a week-long residential outdoor education program experienced a 27 percent increase in their mastery of science concepts. Those students also had better problem solving skills, enhanced self-esteem, and improved behavior in comparison with the classroom-only control group. This new research is prompting action. Several states have launched programs to get children outdoors, and national policy-makers have taken notice by introducing bills to Congress requiring environmental curriculum to be required in the public schools (i.e. House Bill 2054 and Senate Bill 866).

In Grant County, the Gila Conservation Education Center is working hard to address these complex and important issues through our existing programs. December 2010 marked the beginning of a major capital campaign to secure funding for an Executive Director and one full-time equivalent support staff, positions that are vital to the organizations stability and capacity for developing new conservation education programs. If young people are expected to mature into citizens who will take responsibility for the quality of their natural world, they require opportunities to experience and learn about nature during their youth. Research continues to demonstrate the importance of early childhood education in

creating lifelong behaviors and attitudes, and the health of our children and the future of our environment depend on restoring the connection between people and the outdoors.

At this critical and yet exciting time, we invite you to support our mission of promoting natural resource conservation through education, example and involvement. Please know that any amount you are able to give will positively impact the Gila Conservation Education Center's programs and all donations are fully tax-deductible.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Kathy Whiteman

Kathy Whiteman, Ph. D.
Program Director
Gila Conservation Education Center

PS: In lieu of a financial donation, we'd be happy to accept items or services that will help to raise environmental literacy in our area. Please contact the Gila Conservation Education Center at (575) 388-8266, or e-mail at info@gcecnm.org to find out what you can do to help!

Please consider making a secure donation now using the PayPal link.

Thank you