

Guest Blog: A Reason to Protect Nature

by William Crain

Today's environmentalists are trying to save the earth's ecosystems from climate change, pollution, and other damage, but their work is likely to be insufficient. A healthy planet will also require great effort by future generations.

Environmentalists have therefore begun to ask: What childhood traits and experiences promote an adulthood commitment to the natural world? An early sense of responsibility, thoughtfulness, or caring?

These qualities are undoubtedly valuable, but I would like to call attention to a trait highlighted by [Rachel Carson](#), whose warnings about pesticides sparked the modern environmental movement. Carson emphasized the child's Sense of Wonder.



In experiences of wonder, we marvel at what we perceive. Things seem beautiful or incredible. Wonder involves a sense of mystery; there is something we do not understand. Carson focused on the young child's sense of wonder in natural settings, and she believed it is innate. The youngster spontaneously regards the smallest animal or simplest flower as a miracle to behold. And if the child's wonder is permitted to grow, it creates a powerful urge to protect nature.

Individuals who are enthralled by the sight of migrating birds, the majesty of ancient pines, or the beauty of the seashore do not want harm to come to them.

In my experience, however, adults rarely appreciate children's sense of wonder. Instead, they interfere with it.



My conclusion is largely based on my observations at the upstate farm sanctuary my wife, Ellen, and I founded. Over the past decade, dozens of adults have brought young children to meet the animals. The children, especially those between the ages of about 1 and 8 years, are almost always enchanted. They look at a chicken, sheep, or horse in amazement. But the adults do not stand back and enjoy the children's enchantment.

Instead, they try to direct and teach the children. They say, “Say hi to the chicken, Jill.” “Susan, do you remember what chickens give us? Eggs. Remember?” “Tell me, Jack, which are hens and which are roosters?”

The adults distract the children from their spellbound wonder.

Childhood wonder also can be observed at the beach. For example, 1 and 2-year-olds are fascinated by the sand.

They touch it, pat it, and run it through their fingers. They are completely absorbed. They act as if the sand holds the key to some cosmic mystery. I have seen toddlers investigate the sand for over an hour, but the adults usually cut their explorations short. Sometimes the grown-up interrupts the child to clean the child’s hands.



The psychologist Joan Erikson described another adult intervention, which I also have observed on many occasions: The adult goes over and instructs the child on the use of a toy shovel and bucket. The toddler is like a little Einstein, trying to unravel a profound mystery, but the adult is not impressed. The grown-up urges the toddler to build something with conventional toys.

How can we support children’s sense of wonder? One way is to stop interfering with it. But Carson asked us to do more. She urged us to share the child’s open fascination with nature, especially during walks in settings such as parks, woods, and the seashore.

Carson recommended that as we walk with children, we become receptive to all that is around us — the wind, bird calls, the stars, moving clouds. It is important, she said, to experience things freshly.

As we are attracted to objects, or behold those the child points out, it is helpful to ask ourselves, “**What if I had never seen this before?**”

Delight and excitement will often well up within us, and the child will be encouraged by our enthusiasm. Carson said the recovery of wonder also benefits us as adults. It provides relief from the inevitable tensions and weariness of modern life.

The discovery of nature’s amazing beauty lifts our spirits, and its mystery excites us. In the process, we feel a deepening love of nature and want to protect it.

So even when we are by ourselves, not in the company of a child, I suggest that we try to perceive the world more freshly and let wonder become part of our lives.