“Nature is touching me!” Adrian Monk of the television show “Monk” is a pretty messed up individual. But doesn’t this also sound a bit like some of our outdoor museum and historic sites visitors? How many times have we, who are in the nature and living history fields, “in the field” experienced children that were fearful because they were exposed to surroundings that were out of the ordinary to them? Do you think this lack of interaction with nature is an isolated incident or part of a trend of what is typical for today’s youth? and their lack of interaction with nature? Richard Louv, an author and journalist from San Diego, tackles this alarming (at least it should be) issue in his book Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder. Louv’s book was initially published in 2005 and has had a powerful effect in the nature and outdoor education fields, specifically in terms of on how and what we are teaching children and how we can connect to those who have what Louv calls Nature-Deficit Disorder connect to more of them who may be suffering from what Mr. Louv calls “Nature-Deficit Disorder.” Now, as the book gains greater popularity, we in the nature/living history field can ask ourselves, “How do we fit in?” Mr. Louv provides plenty of answers to these questions.

The hypothesis of Last Child in the Woods is that today’s generation of really those of at least a couple of generations back have grown up alienated from nature. This alienation has caused irreparable harm to these recent generations including in the form of Nature-Deficit Disorder. This book is not just a soothsayer of doom and gloom, but it provides a cure for NDD, an antidote for the cure of Nature Deficit Disorder.

What is “Nature Deficit Disorder?” According to Louv:

“Nature-deficit disorder describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional stresses, etc. The disorder can be detected in individuals, families and communities. Nature deficit can even change human behavior in cities, which could ultimately affect their design, since long standing studies show a relationship between the absence, or inaccessibility, of parks and open space with high crime rates, depression, and other urban maladies.

Throughout his book, Mr. Louv introduces the reader to a variety of people from different generations and backgrounds to illustrate number of people, from children to teenagers and young adults to parents and educators, to compare and contrast how children of the most recent generation interact with nature in comparison to children growing up for the majority were able
play in nature through much of the twentieth century. In the last fifteen years or so parents have become reluctant to let their children play in nature for fear of “stranger danger,” and the over-scheduling of extracurricular activities for children has made it difficult for them to use their imaginations and play by themselves, and to the last fifteen years or so where playing in nature in places such as planned communities is illegal or in neighborhoods where parents and other adults fear “stranger danger” and children are not allowed to play outside. A third symptom of nature deficit disorder is the over-scheduling of extracurricular activities and organized sports for children. Many kids just don’t know how to play on their own anymore or use their imagination.

Mr. Louv states that nature deficit can be recognized and reversed, both individually and culturally. However, nature deficit is only one side of the coin. The other side is natural abundance. Not only should we be focusing on what is lost, but also on what can be gained. Whereas the bulk of the reviews of Last Child in the Woods have focused on Mr. Louv’s discussion of the creation of nature deficit disorder, few respond to the second half of his book, where he presents theories about how our society can reverse this trend and begin to bring nature back into our neighborhoods, communities and even large metropolitan areas. He also includes the theory of reconnecting our modern society to an agrarian life. While this seems overly idealistic, just visiting the living history farm in the local park district or metropark is a major connection for many.

In his book, Mr. Louv introduces the reader to the third frontier. This is based on the closing of the first frontier (historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Closing of the Frontier” in 1893) and the “Second Frontier” which was the period of much of the twentieth century; from the era of Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency to the end of the baby boomer era (1964) when there was a great nostalgia of the frontier, characterized by the books of Daniel C. Beard, that encouraged children (mostly boys) to experience the outdoors firsthand, and later by television’s Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone.

This Third frontier, which According to Louv, today’s children are growing up in what is known as the third frontier, which is characterized by at least five trends: a severance of the public and private mind from our food’s origins, a disappearing line between machines, humans, and other animals, an increased intellectual understanding of our relationship with animals, the invasion of our cities by wild animals (even as urban/suburban designers replace wildness with synthetic nature), and the rise of a new kind of suburban form. While this frontier is still being formed, there are many ways that outdoor museums can help to connect the generation of this third frontier to nature. The recent film Barnyard showed all cattle (both male and female) with udders! If this is how children are learning about nature, we have a big job to do. Living
History farms can expose both children and their parents to nature in a realistic and tangible way. The obvious is the living history farm showing children (and their parents!) where their food comes from, but also to show what cattle really look like. The recent animated film *Barnyard* showed ALL cattle (both male and female) with udders! If this is how children are learning about nature, then we have a big job to do. But there are other more passive ways to do this. Take a nature walk through the pasture, meadow or prairie, woodlot or adjacent forest. Ask open answered questions too: Where can we get water from? Where would you go to get out of the rain? Where do the animals get their food?

What do you do when a child knows more about the animals that live in the Amazon rain forests, but doesn’t know what animals live in the woods just down the road from their house? Today’s children are learning more about worldwide ecosystems, which is not a bad thing, but they are not learning about the nature that surrounds them. The elementary school where I went bordered an old pasture that was pretty marshy and had drainage ditches. Here tadpoles were caught in old glass pop bottles every spring (Faygo bottles with screw tops worked the best!). We rode our bikes a few blocks to the small creek that flowed through town and caught our share of crayfish. And we built forts in the nearby vacant lot too. Today, children either wouldn’t even think to do these things, or would get in trouble for doing so. Unfortunately, Mr. Louv introduces readers to many places where children are punished for doing the above activities.

I’m lucky in that I work with naturalists in a state park daily. I feel that besides introducing my visitors to the history of Michigan’s lumber industry, one of the best parts of my job is helping to connect our park visitors, especially children, with the outdoors. While the naturalists do this with the guided nature walks, programs that include animal furs and even live animals, I do this with a number of activities—walking around the nearby forest to gather firewood, having kids help us with toting buckets of water (with a hand carved wood yoke), taking them through the woods to cruise timber (look for the biggest white pines that would be best to cut—though we don’t actually cut any), and use the crosscut saw to cut small logs. The smile on the faces of the young children and on their parents is the greatest of rewards.

Richard Louv’s book, *Last Child in the Woods*, is an important read for everyone who works in an open-air museum or nature center. Many who read this will nod their head in agreement to the stories that he shares with readers. It may also make you rethink some of the ways you share your site with your visitors. I certainly did. One of the most quoted lines in the book is of a fourth-grader, Paul, from San Diego who said, “I like to play indoors because that’s where all the outlets are.” It is our duty to show Paul and others like him that you can have fun outside.