

Talking Conservation

Drie Valleyen

NATURE'S HEALING POWER IS ESSENTIAL TO OUR WELLBEING

Part 1: Nature deficit disorder and the restorative power of nature

Earlier this year, I learned about nature-deficit disorder while listening to a radio talk by Erica Terblanche. She explained how children's disconnection from nature, outdoor play and environmental education impacts us all.

Nature-deficit disorder is a term coined by journalist Richard Louv in 2005 in his book, "Last Child in the Woods." It describes the growing gap between children and nature, highlighting the negative consequences of spending less time outdoors. Although not a medical diagnosis, nature deficit disorder has become a useful metaphor for discussing the human costs of alienation from nature.

Several factors contribute to nature-deficit disorder in our modern society. The abundance of electronic devices and digital entertainment has drastically reduced children's outdoor activities. Urbanisation and limited open spaces make it difficult for children to access natural environments. Additionally, parental fears about the safety of their children have further limited outdoor play.

According to Louv, the lack of interaction with nature profoundly affects their physical and mental health. Studies suggest that nature-deficit disorder is linked to a range of health issues, including obesity, lack of concentration, and higher rates of emotional and physical illnesses. Children who spend less time outdoors are more likely to suffer from conditions

such as short-sightedness and vitamin D deficiency. The absence of natural play also contributes to a diminished use of the senses and a lack of ecological literacy. These problems associated with nature-deficit disorder, have similar effects on adults.

Reconnecting with nature offers numerous benefits. Exposure to natural settings has been shown to improve mood, reduce stress, and enhance cognitive function. Children who spend time outdoors are more likely to engage in physical activities, which can help combat obesity and other health issues. These children tend to be more confident and demonstrate leadership qualities. Moreover, experiences in nature foster a sense of stewardship and responsibility towards the environment.

How does one prevent nature-deficit disorder?

Schools, cultural organisations and communities can play a crucial role by incorporating outdoor education and activities into their programmes. Urban and regional planning should prioritise the creation of green spaces, green corridors and safe environments for outdoor play. Parents should set limits on screen time, organise family activities in nature and encourage their children to spend more time outdoors.

Nature-deficit disorder compels us to address the growing disconnect between humans and nature. Reconnecting with nature benefits our health and fosters a sustainable and environmentally conscious society.