

Charlotte Viewpoint

Common Threads - Linking Nature and Spirit

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Lindsay Brownell attends Davidson College, trying to reconcile interests in biology and English. She lives in the Ecological Co-Operative, a student-run house dedicated to living in a more ecologically friendly way. She enjoys tea, exploring campus at night, listening to music, sleeping, team sports, photography, appreciating art and traveling.

The lobby of the ImaginOn buzzed with people. The doors to the small concrete courtyard were thrown open, allowing the warm October air to swirl around the people gathered inside. In attendance were some of Charlotte's biggest names in business and finance. But these heavy hitters were not there to discuss the state of the economy; they were gathered under the combined banners of the [Catawba Society](#) and the [Carolina Thread Trail](#), two of Charlotte's most prominent environmental conservation groups.

About five minutes before 7 PM, dozens of attendees began to file into the auditorium for the evening's headline event. After a few opening remarks, the keynote speaker made his way to the podium. Given the environmental leanings of the audience, he could easily have been a prominent scientist defending global warming or a farmer promoting the benefits of locally grown food. But the man who took the stage was [Richard Louv](#), an award-winning journalist and author.

Louv is the author of [Last Child in the Woods](#), a well-researched, extremely readable treatise detailing what he calls "nature-deficit disorder", and the trend that today's children are spending less time outside. Louv spent ten years traveling around the country interviewing children and parents about their experiences in nature, as well as doing exhaustive research on the benefits of regular contact with the outdoors. Louv held the audience captive for his entire allotted 45 minutes; it was clear that beneath his calm, professorial exterior, he had a burning passion for his work. "Despite steadily dropping figures in the amount of time children spend outside, studies have found that regularly exposing children with ADHD to nature improved their concentration and cognitive abilities," said Louv. "More and more evidence is telling us what we used to know intrinsically but have forgotten in this age of computers, video games and climate control: nature is *good* for us."

Last Child in the Woods was an inspiration and catalyst for the Carolina Thread Trail project, which was conceived in 2005 by [Foundation For The Carolinas](#) as a strategy to counteract the rapid loss of accessible natural and open spaces in the region. “Reconnecting children with nature was a topic that sparked tremendous interest--you could see people's posture change and energy surge as they recalled the special outdoor places where they played as a kid and lamented the growing distance between kids today and the natural world,” said Ann Hayes Browning, current project director of the Carolina Thread Trail. Officially initiated in 2007, the Carolina Thread Trail project is an effort to create a network of bicycle and walking trails through “green spaces” that will ultimately cover and protect 7,300 square miles of land, linking over two million people across 15 counties in the Carolinas upon completion.

The local response has been remarkable over the Thread Trail’s two years of existence: over 150 resolutions of support have been signed by municipalities, county governments, agencies and organizations throughout the region, and the organization has awarded over \$820,000 in grant money. Carolina Thread Trail Master Plans have been fully adopted in six of the fifteen participating counties, and in 2009, eleven communities unveiled marked Carolina Thread Trail segments that are now being enjoyed by their citizens.

There is a common theme that runs deep in both Louv’s work and in the work of the Carolina Thread Trail: connection, in both a physical and metaphysical sense. Just as Louv’s book calls for a rekindling of the rapidly disappearing communion with nature, the Thread Trail is providing Carolina families with a way to reestablish that link. “Connecting people to nature and to each other is the fundamental mission of The Thread. After all, our tag line is ‘Weaving Communities Together.’ I believe that it is this nature/people connection than is inspiring interest and action,” said Browning. Louv agreed, saying of the Catawba River Basin and the southern Piedmont region of North Carolina: “We need these places for the health of our cultural spirit. The Thread Trail is one example of how regions can address what will be, in an urbanizing world, a growing hunger for the health and well-being that nature provides to human beings.”

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