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Mapping children's access to nature in Kalamazoo

December 17, 2009



Photo: Scott Rolfson

First published in 2005, journalist Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* has been influential beyond what anyone could have imagined at the time. The message that America's kids are losing touch with nature has given rise to a broad-based movement to "leave no child inside." TPL, which offered assistance to Rich Louv soon after the book was published, has sponsored some of his presentations and published his ideas in *Land&People* magazine.

In Kalamazoo, Michigan, Louv's nonprofit, the [Children and Nature Network](#), launched a community-driven pilot process to help kids connect with nature. But there was no baseline data—no way to know which kids had access to nature and which did not. What they needed was a map showing all city, county, and school parks, playgrounds, and green spaces and how their locations related to key demographic data.

TPL's Conservation Vision service helped them put this together and has now published a [page about the project](#) on TPL's website.

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With help from the Kalamazoo Nature Center’s research department, TPL first collected the data to map all city, county, and other publicly accessible parks, greenspaces and nature play areas, such as school playgrounds. Then, TPL GIS developers created a vulnerability index using key demographic data:

- Children from birth to 14 years of age;
- Percentage of population comprised of minorities;
- Percent of population making less then \$25,000 a year;
- Population density.

This analysis gave a sense of where the most vulnerable populations reside. These areas were color-coded with dark red and orange, and overlaid with the greenspace map to show the relationship of vulnerable populations to outdoor nature-based recreational opportunity.

A second analysis involved using GIS data, imagery, and first-person descriptions to assess parks’ and schools’ abilities to provide natural play opportunities, and scoring them according to how naturally diverse the play areas are. Factors such as percentage of area developed or paved and the presence of natural areas, such as wetlands, forest, water features, unmowed grass or garden were considered.

Parks with a diversity of habitats and accessible natural play areas, and schools with small amounts of paved surfaces with grass for open play ranked good to excellent. TPL applied the concept of buffers around existing parks, playgrounds, and recreational open spaces to determine the quarter-mile, or 10-minute, walking radius around these sites (a metric recommended by the National Recreation and Park Association) and their proximity to the identified vulnerable populations.

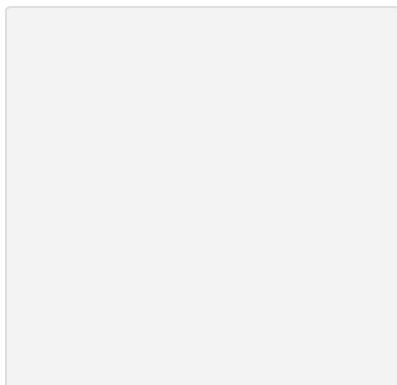
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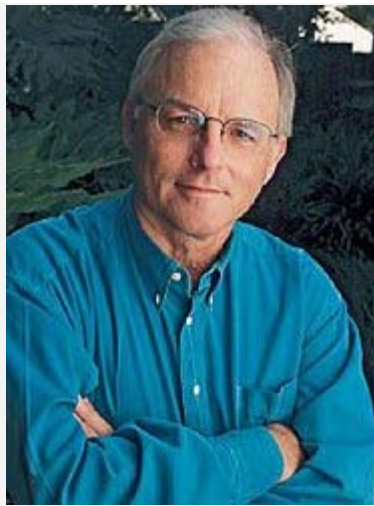
Tags: Children & Nature Network, Kalamazoo, Last Child in the Woods, Richard Louv, The Trust for Public Land, TPL
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Louv: “button parks” could connect people with nature

November 20, 2009



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Richard Louv - Photo: Robert Burroughs

Writing on his blog, *Field Notes from the Future*, children-and-nature guru [Richard Louv](#) proposes “button parks” to provide access to close-to-home nature .

“Pocket park” is the term for small parks created by governments or developers; button parks — well, people can sew those on themselves. . .

As neighborhoods work to preserve or create parcels of nearby nature, they could symbolically join these special places to similar ones throughout a city; such an effort could be a new way to build parkland across an urban region – a kind of decentral park.

The concept is especially apt for Carolina Thread Trail—a partnership effort to create a linked system of natural areas in the Carolinas, writes Louv, who recently had an opportunity to visit the region. (TPL is a partner in the [project](#).)

The reason that the Carolina Thread Trail is called a *thread* trail is not only because of the image that word evokes, but because of the Carolinas’ long dependence on the textile industries. . .

What if people had access to free tool kits which helped people create their own “button parks” connected to the “thread” trail? These button parks wouldn’t need to be literally connected to the trail, but would serve as small extensions of the trail throughout the region.

Read on at [Field Notes from the Future](#)

Read an interview with Richard Louv from TPL’s *Land&People* magazine



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