

UNNATURAL ENVIRONMENTS

Experience marketing is adept at creating environments that approximate reality in ways that are intriguing, accessible, safe, but leave participants increasingly unmoved. This is particularly noticeable when artfully incorporating the natural world into unnatural environments. There are magnificent aquarium exhibits where one is eye-to-eye with sharks in glass tanks. But no one could equate the aquarium experience with an ocean dive. Now carefully controlled, experience environments are becoming so ubiquitous that reporting suggests we are losing touch with the natural world in favor of man-made substitutions.

So often with subtle societal shifts, “nature-deficit-disorder” has been first described as a problem for the young. In his 2005 book “Last Child In The Woods,” author Richard Louv points to a lack of childhood experience in unstructured time spent outdoors for such pursuits as tree climbing, fort building, playing in the creek, or catching frogs. The Boy Scouts of America, long known for its outdoors programs and self-reliance training reports an overall decline in membership among all scouting groups in 2006 of 2.4%.

Adults, too, are getting disassociated from the natural world. According to the National Park Service, visits to national parks peaked in 1987 and have been declining since by at least 1% per year. Attendance at most national parks is now down by about 20%. Most states report a drop off in applications for fishing and hunting licenses. The Pennsylvania Fish Commission reports fishing license sales have declined from 1.1 million in 1991 to 833,000 in 1996. Golf clubs are also experiencing shrinking memberships.

We do not yet know all the reasons why people are turning away from these outdoor pursuits, although urban populations worldwide now exceed rural populations by 20%. This will be true of developing countries also by 2030, according to current population projections. It seems the appeal of man-made environments is overwhelming. They are predictable, safe, comfortable and capable of delivering uniformity of experience. Certain leisure industries are profiting: gyms and indoor sports clubs, cruise lines, day spas, malls, comedy clubs, theme parks. What is missing from the experience is venture into the unknown to meet the unexpected, the challenging and sometimes the extraordinarily beautiful. At the very least, adventure in the natural world sharpens the senses and engages the imagination. And since childhood is when imagination develops, the argument that we are depriving the species of important survival skills when we over-structure and over-protect the young has some validity. For if we are to help our world with its myriad environmental challenges, how can we do so when all we know of it is what we see on TV?

Entertainment media and the virtual world are no substitutes for natural world experience. The Web is a wonderful tool for research, but surfing from page to page with no clear objective can be a time waster. Downloading email several times a day can also eat up hours of time. Few people really need such hyper-connectivity, though many choose it. For most of us, limiting such activities can free up significant amounts of unstructured time. Using that time to build real world connections has numerous benefits. In his book, "Fired Up, Or Burned Out," Michael Lee Stallard writes eloquently of the power of connectivity to create cultures within organizations where people of all ranks share a sense of purpose. And so often the model for such cultures can be found among the complex interrelated systems of nature, best observed and appreciated at first hand.

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