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## Louv, Torres: Our kids need time outside

**Increased inactivity contributes to region's high obesity rates and chronic disease issues.**

By Richard Louv, and Richard Torres Updated 3:52 pm, Saturday, April 13, 2013



Jazmyn Jones competed in a jump rope event during the 2010 Street Olympics Opening Ceremony at Mickey Leland Memorial Park.

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One of the most pressing issues facing Houston and the country is what some health experts now call the "pandemic of inactivity," and as part of that conversation, a useful new buzz-phrase sums up this issue: Sitting is the new smoking. While the health issues are complex, a cost-effective antidote is available, just outside the door.

It's time to reconnect our children to Houston's healing nature.

Statistically, Americans are averaging 9.3 hours of sitting every day. While we know that diet and genetics contribute to obesity, simple inactivity and prolonged sitting may be a killer even if we don't put on the pounds.

In July, *The Lancet*, a prestigious British medical journal, launched a series of alarming reports, confirming that physical inactivity is a leading risk factor for deaths due to noncommunicable diseases.

"Researchers conclude that inactivity is causing 5.3 million deaths per year," according to the journal's summary. "Further, this is very similar to the number of deaths attributed (by the World Health Organization) to tobacco smoking, and one of the papers in this series calculated the population attributable risk to be very similar for tobacco and inactivity."

Houston has a high obesity rate, and, to be sure, inactivity plays a large role in that. **Harold W.** (Bill) Kohl III, professor of epidemiology and kinesiology with the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living at the **University of Texas School of Public Health** has addressed the strong correlation of children's physical activity to the amount of time they spend outdoors. A sedentary lifestyle can be linked to many chronic diseases facing children, not only those that afflict their lives now, but in their adulthood as well.

Time spent in the natural world isn't a panacea, but it's definitely part of the solution.

Last month, the **Houston Wilderness** annual luncheon celebrated Greater Houston's and southeast Texas's diverse bioregions - our necklace of jewels: the Central Flyway, the southeast Texas's rich piney woods, Big Thicket, forested Columbia and Trinity bottomlands, the prairies, coastal marshes and bays and estuaries. All of this beauty is immeasurably valuable, for its own sake. But it also provides both prevention and therapy for what ails us.

A growing body of evidence indicates that children need far more activity, including unstructured play, to improve health, cognition and emotional well-being. Nature-based exercise appears to be especially effective.

As a result, some pediatricians and mental health professionals are now prescribing "green exercise" in parks and other natural settings. And at least some schools and determined science teachers are insisting that their students do a

portion of their learning outdoors, in nature - adding priceless balance to their lives.

At the Houston Wilderness luncheon, the 400-plus attendees, who included Mayor **Annise Parker**, Harris County Judge **Ed Emmett** and numerous business and civic leaders, were issued this challenge: What if the city imagined its potential future by looking through the prism of nature? What impact would that vision have on the region's health? What would its education system look like? What about its new residential developments and redevelopments? Its future shopping areas? Its economic health? Its ability to market itself to the most creative people and businesses from around the world?

To some extent, Houstonians have already embarked on this challenge by answering some of these questions with long-term nature solutions.

A mix of nonprofit organizations, government action and private enterprise have worked with Parker to create the Healthy Houston initiative; Houston residents passed a major parks bond as part of the **Bayou Greenway Initiative**; and a multi-county Sam Houston Trail and Greenbelt Initiative is working collaboratively to preserve and protect green space around the region's major watersheds.

As Parker highlighted during the Houston Wilderness luncheon, the City of Houston is working to add many miles of new trails and additional park space along the prairie and bayou systems throughout the city as it promotes healthy outdoor activities for all citizens.

Houston has also joined a large network of such groups devoted to getting kids outdoors, including the new Get Outdoors Houston! initiative and Texas Children in Nature, which recently has launched a strong strategic plan to connect children to nature through cross-sector and bipartisan support. Leaders such as former first lady **Laura Bush** have offered their enthusiastic support.

Houston Wilderness has pledged to work within each of the seven major eco-regions to improve, expand and preserve opportunities for all the communities in Harris and surrounding counties to spend more time outdoors. It will work with numerous nature-oriented member organizations around the region on a variety of conservation and recreation policy efforts.

If the challenge of seeing the city's future through the prism of nature is fulfilled, the greater Houston region can be the first major urban area to dramatically improve its community's health through increased time in nature - where we live, work and play.

*Louv is chairman emeritus of the Children & Nature Network. Torres is chairman of the Houston Wilderness board of directors.*

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