

Children's right to the great outdoors

By JIM HUCKABAY Contributing Columnist

Feb 27, 2015

Just three years ago, I returned from the International Sportsman Expo in Lost Wages, Nevada, armed with information about the Nevada Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights. With the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club (the oldest organized sportsmen's group in the state), County Auditor Jerry Pettit, Commissioner Gary Berndt and a number of others willing to play, we set out to create and establish a Washington Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights.

The whole idea, of course, is to get kids and their families into the outdoors, safely recreating in the ways that bring them pleasure and satisfaction — and affirm that they have the right to do so.

It has long been argued that children who have developed a real connection with nature are more grounded and better able to navigate difficult times. We figured that making sure children know that they have a fundamental right to connect with the natural world, and can be exposed to the range of ways those connections can be made, is a huge step toward a better future for humanity.

This is what we took to potential sponsors in the state Legislature a year ago: "The children of Washington have the right to discover and experience the outdoors through activities including the following: Create an outdoor adventure; Explore a trail; Camp under the stars; Go fishing; Discover nature; Explore Washington's heritage; Go on a picnic; Play in a park, in the water, in the snow, on the rocks; Go hunting; Learn to be safe around firearms and other outdoor tools."

To be carried as a resolution, it needed a great deal of work on form, so over the past year, we carried out more research, and added a number of appropriate “Whereas” sections. We presented it to Kyle Lynch, the legislative assistant to state Sen. Judy Warnick, who wanted to sponsor the Senate resolution. Kyle discovered early on that creating a Washington Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights was making policy — not done by resolution. So he went back to the drawing board and created a resolution with enough of our elements to give us a solid start.

Thus, this morning at about 9 a.m. Sen. Warnick of the 13th District rose in the Washington State Senate to address our resolution. After a few words about the value of family outdoor activity, and acknowledgement of the groups which brought it forward, she commended the following resolution to the Washington State Senate for adoption.

Washington state families' outdoor heritage

“Whereas, this Resolution encourages Washington families and children to participate in outdoor activities and discover their heritage, developing a connection with nature and building a foundation for a lifelong environmental stewardship; and

“Whereas, numerous studies have shown that children who regularly and frequently participate in outdoor activities are healthier, perform better in school, possess better social skills and higher self-images, and lead more fulfilled lives; And “WHEREAS, the health and well-being of the children of Washington are vital to the future success of the great State of Washington and the United States of America; and

“WHEREAS, embracing Washington's natural beauty and outdoor heritage can play a significant role in encouraging families to increase levels of participation in outdoor activities which bring them satisfaction and appreciation for our state's natural wonder; and “WHEREAS, it is in the interests of the citizens of Washington State to encourage families and children to explore and enjoy those outdoor activities which interest them; and “WHEREAS, more than 13 states (including California, Colorado,

Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee and Wisconsin) have adopted, or are in the process of adopting similar resolution in recognition of the importance of outdoor activities to the future well-being of their citizens; and

"NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Washington State Families' Outdoor Heritage shall honor the tradition of engaging the vast wealth of Washington's natural beauty and affirm that the children of Washington greatly benefit by discovering and experiencing the outdoors through activities such as hiking, adventuring, camping, fishing, hunting, family picnics, community parks, beach combing, and many more activities; thereby developing a relationship with Washington's great natural resources; and learn respect and safety for the tools of outdoor recreation and exploration."

Was the resolution approved? Given that this was written a day or two ago, I can only hope so. With wide and growing support, we now start here. Next year, we will have a broadly sponsored bill in the Legislature creating the Washington Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights. Thank you, Senator Warnick.

Jim Huckabay is retired from the Department of Geography at Central and is the author of "WILD WINDS and Other Tales of Growing Up in the Outdoor West," available online and at local bookstores. He has been writing this weekly column since the first Friday of 1999. Contact Jim and join in the discussion of this and other columns at www.insidetheoutdoors.com.

Jim Huckabay