

Inside the Outdoors: Working toward a Kids Outdoor Bill of Rights

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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." Contact Jim and join in the discussion of this and other columns at www.insidetheoutdoors.com.

About this time a year ago, Jerry Pettit and I started a conversation about firearms. Sometime not long after, we began discussing my ideas about a Washington Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights.

Upon my return from Christmas in Denver, I intended to pick up the banner again. As so often happens when I put an intention into the universe, the conversation becomes richer with intervening Denver moments.

I have a fair number of young grand-Hucklings. All of the Hucklings who are parenting them have had extensive experience with firearms and the outdoors, and an abiding interest in their children's outdoor connections. Our conversations about my hope for

our statewide Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights, and the safety and skills training which might accompany it, were positive and straightforward — it is critical for kids and for our future. Given that these grand-Hucklings range from 3 to 19 years old, somewhere in there were conversations about age-appropriate training and outdoor opportunities.

The day after Christmas, my 19-year-old grandson stepped off a commuter train on Denver's east side. Preoccupied with his University of Denver homework and his kempo training, he realized too late that he was at the wrong station.

Almost immediately, a young man shoved a handgun into his chest, and said "A bullet in your chest or get down!" Two others stepped in behind him, gently prodding him with knives and making small cuts in his coat. They relieved him of his laptop, his new cell phone and his wallet, but left him with his textbooks. No stranger to firearms and their handling, and well-practiced in the inner stillness of the proper kempo response to sudden attacks, he remained calm and quiet. His first thought, he told us later, was "Why won't he just say please?"

Some hours after, a woman found his ID in the trash a distance from the station — and the \$2,000 check my son had given him for tuition. The police took his statement and seemed genuinely concerned about the robbery (as well as security around these commuter rail stations), but without bloodshed, the incident apparently became a lower-priority problem.

On my drive back to Paradise, I found myself mulling over what I had not heard in the half-dozen or more times he retold the story of being robbed. Not once did anyone ask — other than the police — anything about the three guys' ages or their ethnic/racial backgrounds. Over and over, I wondered if that was because such information just isn't important anymore.

I have written about this stuff and I have spoken widely about this stuff. The bottom line is that more and more kids are learning to live without an earth connection, and that shows up as a sort of generalized fear in their lives. That fear is what causes so

many young men to turn to violence — to a meanness — as a coping mechanism. I have no doubt that it is only through some hands-on connection that young people develop a true sense of responsibility for themselves and others, and a sense of security in our own lives.

Connecting kids to nature

Over a couple decades of my life in Denver, I helped get many inner city and disadvantaged kids into the outdoors with the intention that they develop a connection with nature which might ground them and help them navigate difficult times. I watched many of them blossom and light up, and I had genuine hope that none of them would one day shove a firearm into a person's chest. Making sure children know that they have a fundamental right to connect with nature and be exposed to the range of ways that we all connect is a huge step forward, I think.

Thus, Jerry and I continue pursuing thoughts about firearms, a public conversation about the issues with which people across America are struggling, and the proper form for our proposed statement of kids' outdoor rights. As an active member of the Washington Sportsmen's Outdoor Caucus, the 95-year-old Kittitas County Field and Stream Club (the oldest organized sportsmen's group in the state) will present our proposed resolution to legislators who have already agreed to sponsor it.

It isn't yet in the form we want it to be, but below is a pretty good idea of what we will pass along to Sen. Pam Roach's office and the other sponsors.

"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."

Here's to 2014, and building a foundation for our children's safe outdoor future.

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