

Inside the Outdoors: That kid's Outdoor Bill of Rights

By JIM HUCKABAY Contributing Columnist

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If at first you don't succeed... You recall no doubt that a number of us have been trying to get the state to adopt a Washington Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights for several years. Jerry Pettit, Deborah Essman, Gary Berndt, and I have spoken to any number of groups and made several trips to Olympia to make it happen. Over the years, our blessed 13th Legislative District delegation, led by Senator Judy Warnick, with the strong support of current Representatives Dent and Ybarra (and those who served before them), has pushed hard — to little avail — against a state legislature that seems largely disinterested in, and distrustful of, encouraging outdoor kids. There are other ways to elevate this kids' Bill of Rights. After all, this is important. To paraphrase Jodi Larsen, Upper County Rotary: "Children are the emissaries we send into a time we will never see — what do we want them to take along?"

This whole business started in 2012, when I made a run to the Outdoor Expo in Lost Wages, Nevada, to follow up on some outdoor writing for a slick magazine and touch base with my friends from Safari Afrika. The two-day reunion was a pleasure beyond words, and somewhere in that big expo, I found something to enhance our work for an outdoor future. The Nevada Department of Wildlife has a "Nevada Outdoor Kids" program, created under The Nevada Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights. Banners around the outdoor kids area boasted that "The children of Nevada have the right to discover and experience the outdoors through the following activities: Create an outdoor adventure; Explore a trail; Camp under the stars; Go fishing; Discover nature; Explore Nevada's heritage; Go on a picnic; Play in a park, in the water, in the snow, on the rocks."

A number of us, inspired by the efforts of Nevada and fellow outdoor-oriented states, have continued to work on adoption of our own version of such a bill of rights. Given all the ways that firearms, camping equipment, hiking boots, fishing gear and campfires are interwoven with our outdoor heritage, we committed early on to include these. Today, well over half of our 50 states have, at one level or another, adopted a Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights, and we should take our place among them.

Following is the Washington Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights, as adopted by the now-100-year-old Kittitas County Field and Stream Club in December of 2013. "Honoring family outdoor traditions and interests, 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; Ride a horse; 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."

In our continuing efforts to achieve a statewide adoption of this Bill of Rights for kids, it is now in the hands of several key influencers among major outdoor recreation organizations in the state. It is being supported by leaders of the statewide Hunters Heritage Council, Washingtonians for Wildlife Conservation, and the Mule Deer Foundation. Other outdoor-oriented groups are coming on board, and it is the intention of many that the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights finds its way to a home with the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources.

(Interestingly, carrying the "outdoor rights" issue to another level, as of early 2018, 21 states had adopted constitutional amendments protecting citizens' rights to hunt and fish. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (www.ncsl.org/research/environment-and-natural-resources/state-constitutional-right-to-hunt-and-fish.aspx), one of those, Vermont, adopted the rights in 1777. The other 20 state constitutional amendments were approved by voters in recent years.)

I have written and 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. I have no doubt that it is only through some hands-on earth connection that young people develop a true sense of responsibility for themselves and others, and a sense of security in their own lives. More than that, when push comes to shove (and it will) those with no solid connection to the outdoors — and little understanding of the tools used there — will not give a rat's backside about a sustainable outdoor future. An Outdoor Children's Bill of Rights will be a fine start.

We may yet get a bill through our legislature to officially create a Washington Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights. In the meantime, more and more organizations and key influencers will be carrying the banner. This is important: only earth-connected children will grow into the generations committed to protecting our heritage — our outdoor future.

Jim Huckabay is retired from the Department of Geography at Central. His "WILD WINDS and Other Tales of Growing Up in the Outdoor West" is available online and at bookstores. Contact Jim and join in discussions at www.insidetheoutdoors.com.