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Local residents seek legislative action for the outdoors

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer
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From left, Kittitas County Auditor Jerry Pettit, Kittitas County Field and Stream Club President Deborah Essmanz and Diane and Jim Huckabay pose with Sen. Judy Warnick for a photo.

Washington State Legislative Sup

A group of Kittitas County residents helped pass a resolution in the state Legislature last month to promote getting kids outdoors, and they plan to continue efforts to support family outdoor heritage.

Kittitas County Auditor Jerry Pettit, Kittitas County Field and Stream Club President Deborah Essman and Diane and Jim Huckabay were all smiles on Feb. 27 as they stood with state Sen. Judy Warnick after the resolution was approved.

Next year they plan to push for a major state government policy change that calls for the integration of a get-the-kids-outdoors initiatives into several state departments and agencies.

The 2016 legislation will be called the Washington Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights, and Jim Huckabay believes it is way past time for the bill to be passed in the state.

Kick the ball

Huckabay said he's been encouraging families with children for 30 years to get outdoors in some way.

"For this resolution, I would say I kicked the ball rolling, but a lot of others joined in and helped keep it rolling," Huckabay said. "It was a community effort, a team effort."

He said the resolution (its text was in Huckabay's Feb. 27 Daily Record column) was the beginning in a likely uphill effort to get the children's bill of rights legislation passed, with it all aimed at the health of future generations.

He said educators, psychologists, health care specialists and sociologists have for years indicated children with a connection, respect, appreciation and experience with nature will have better lives now and as adults.

Huckabay's legislative quest began three years ago when he learned about the state of Nevada's Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights and wanted the same for Washington. Twelve other states have adopted similar state-policy initiatives.

Assisting and supporting the local effort for the recent resolution were the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club and Essman, Pettit, county Commissioner Gary Berndt, volunteer work by the commissioners' staff including Julie Kjorsvik, and others.

Last child

Huckabay has introduced several area residents to the book by Richard Louv, "Last Child in the Woods," that warns about the growing "nature deficit" in the lives of many children who are growing more connected to electronic pastimes indoors.

The book also gives practical ideas and tips how families can get safely reconnected to the outdoors.

Essman said she's read the book and is concerned about how many families and children have never connected in some way to the outdoors.

Essman said the field and stream club since 2010 has put money where its heart is by donating \$3,250 to the annual Fifth-Grade Camp for Ellensburg School District students at Lazy F Camp, including a donation for this year.

She's also volunteered at the camp as a wildlife and plant presenter for 23 years. She said the club challenges other individuals and groups to donate to the camp and support the 2016 legislative effort.

"We want to be a positive force in reversing the nature deficit locally and connect kids with nature," Essman said.

She said many kids are "pretty savvy" about environmental concerns and get a good background in natural sciences in the classroom, but many still are not "engaging with all their senses with doing things outdoors."

Same concerns

Pettit said he's had the same concerns through the years and has met several times with Huckabay about what can be done.

"The benefits to the lives of kids in activities outdoors, I mean to nearly every aspect of their lives, is tremendous," Pettit said.

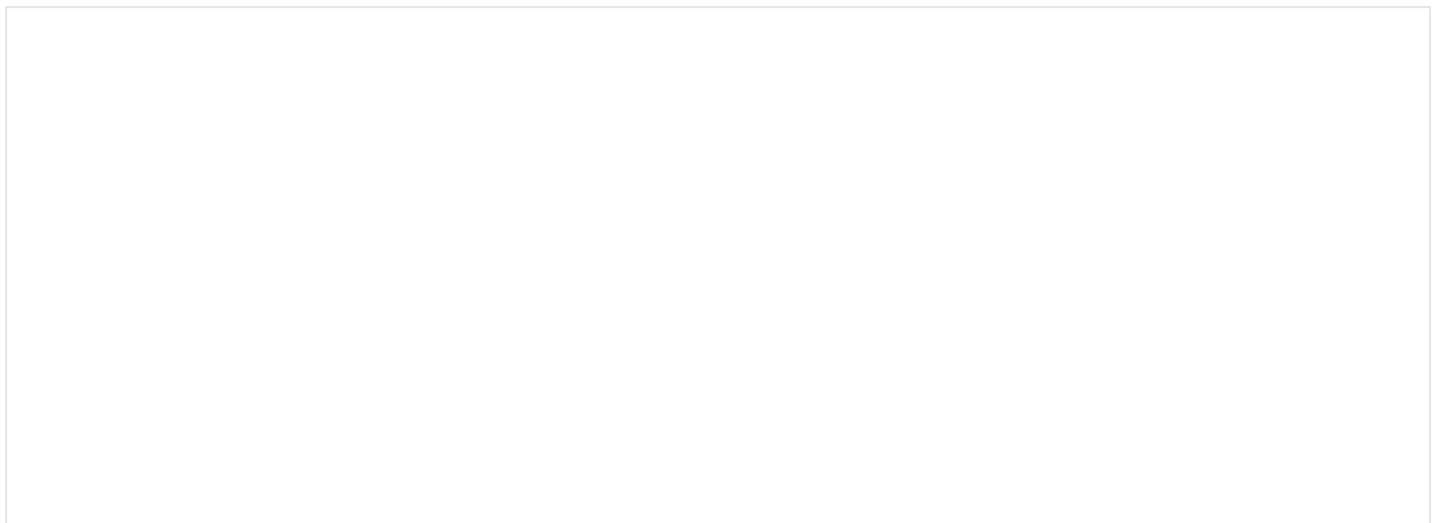
Berndt said he worked with Huckabay on the resolution during the Christmas holiday time, and he's reading Louv's book.

"This is something we can do to help children and their families right now," Berndt said. "Here in Washington (state), especially right here in Kittitas County we have such a wealth of natural beauty that's like right at our doorstep."

Essman said she's concerned that children growing up without some level of understanding about nature will, as adults, not care about preserving and protecting it.

Some of the early wording for the bill of rights, still a work in progress, includes:

"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."





Kids outdoors: Saving the experience

Mike Johnston