

How do you fight “nature-deficit disorder”? Two troop leaders came up with some creative solutions.

No Girl Left Inside

By Weld Royal



Hundreds of Girl Scouts across the country have taken part in tree-planting programs in recent years.

“**T**o the lover of pure wildness, Alaska is one of the most wonderful countries in the world,” wrote naturalist John Muir—but try telling that to some of the girls in Girl Scout Troop 252 in Thorne Bay, Ala. “We’ve got girls with pretty clothes and shoes, and on slimy days they just don’t want to go out,” says leader Julie Anderson, 32.

They’re not alone: a University of Maryland study shows that between 1997 and 2003, the proportion of children ages 9–12 who spent time fishing, gardening, or walking on the beach declined 50 percent.

Anderson’s challenge in Alaska is heightened by the fact that Thorne Bay is a village of only about 600 people, so the group includes girls of all ages. Activities have to appeal to girls in kindergarten through seventh grade.

For ideas, Anderson adapted lessons from Project WILD, a national environmental education program.

One project that really worked, she says, was getting the girls to tap into the sounds that surround them. From autumn to spring, the howl of wolves can be heard almost every night in the village’s forests.

Anderson developed a discussion about predator-and-prey relation-

ships and had the girls research how deer camouflage themselves and how wolves behave. They then headed outside for a modified game of tag, with some girls pretending they were deer and others the wolves. “It was a rainy day, but they were elated,” Anderson says.

Meanwhile, two thousand miles away, Sharon Hager was brainstorming ways to interest her girls in fresh air. Her solution: Make them leaders.

As part of last year’s Girl Scouts of the USA 95th anniversary celebrations, many groups around the country planted 95 trees. The Girl Scouts of the San Fernando Valley was one of them: It held a tree-planting jamboree at a public park in Los Angeles.

The girls of Senior Troop 481

got involved by taking on new responsibilities. “They were really interested in an opportunity to lead others,” says Hager, 51. Fifteen girls attended a workshop organized by Tree People, a Los Angeles nonprofit, and learned the basics of how to plant—how big a hole to dig, the proper way to prepare a root ball, how much dirt to add.

Then they were ready to take charge. “At least 400 Girl Scouts came out, and the Seniors supervised. It was really empowering for them,” says Hager.

Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin Books, 2005), writes that, “Never before in history have children been so plugged in—and so out of touch with the natural world.” Exposure to the outdoors is the first way to change that. ■



Find Ideas Here:

- Project WILD offers activity suggestions for students and their educators (www.projectwild.org).
- *From Sidewalks to Treetops: The Amateur’s Guide to Exploring Nature in Your Neighborhood* is a Girl Scouts video and guidebook for exploring wildlife and plant life in any setting, including cities. It’s also available in Spanish (<http://goshop.girlscouts.org>).
- The Environmental Protection Agency offers online games and resources for adults about flora, fauna, and the earth in general (www.epa.gov/kids).