



**GREAT LAKES**  
Stewardship Initiative

Expanding classrooms. Strengthening communities.

# Some Thoughts on the Next Generation of Stewards

by Jerry Dennis

In the 20 years that I've been writing books for a living, I've been fortunate to receive many letters from readers. They cover a lot of ground, but many of them begin something like this:

*"When I was a kid growing up in Chicago, Denver, Toronto, Detroit, my class took a trip, my family vacationed, my best friend and I stole a car, and I visited Lake Superior, the Au Sable River, the Boundary Waters, the Everglades, the Rocky Mountains, and I fell in love with crashing waves, whitewater rapids, wind in the trees, brook trout, hawks, coyotes, hiking at night, sleeping on the beach, fishing for suckers, canoeing over waterfalls, and my life has never been the same. I just thought you'd like to know."*

And I do like to know. I'm fascinated. We're so deeply involved with nature on so many levels that most of the time we can't decide if we're part of it or apart from it. Of all the contradictions in human behavior, our relationship with nature is the most contradictory.

We love it and hate it to death.

We abuse it heartlessly and defend it ferociously.

We annihilate species, tear down mountains, and suck the life from rivers, even while fighting with all our strength to save spotted owls and black rhinos and remnant rain forests.

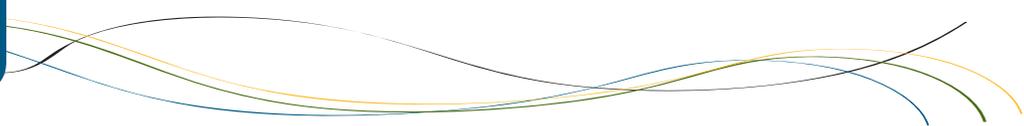
We dump our wastes into waterways and clear-cut half the world's forests—while bestowing our highest honors on artists, writers, and composers who celebrate the beauty of nature.

How can we understand our place in nature, when our place is so contradictory, fluid, and uncertain? How can we expect people to care about something so apparently insignificant as an endangered clam or shorebird when there's work to do and bills to pay and retirement to worry about?

I don't know. The older I get the less certain I am that I have any answers.

But I know two things, at least: We need people who care. And most people only care about those things with which they have personal experience.

For the first time in human history, more people live in cities than in the countryside. In the U.S., children have fewer opportunities every year to



explore woodlots and creek bottoms and other pockets of wild nature that were once found near almost any neighborhood. And with all the indoor diversions available, more and more kids would rather stay in their houses anyway. The result is an imminent “extinction of experience,” in the words of one ecologist,<sup>1</sup> and “nature-deficit disorder,” in the words of another.<sup>2</sup> We’re creating generations of young people who are increasingly uncomfortable outdoors and increasingly less interested in the environmental problems that they’ll one day inherit.

Already it’s an old story, and any of us can probably come up with examples to illustrate it. A teacher I met in Milwaukee says half his elementary school students have never seen Lake Michigan—and most of them live less than a mile from it.

Sandy Bihn, who is the Western Lake Erie Lakekeeper, told me that she has spoken to students in more than a hundred classrooms from Detroit to Sandusky. She always begins each session by asking how many kids have ever walked on the beaches of Lake Erie, swam in it, fished in it, or boated on it. The results are remarkably consistent: five percent of the students in every class raise their hands.

How can we hope that the other 95 percent will care enough to take over the job of stewardship?

We can throw fistfuls of facts at them, as I’ve tried a few times, reaching into my grab-bag and coming out with the one about the Great Lakes encompassing 94,000 square miles of water, an area the size of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont combined.

Or the one that says they contain six quadrillion gallons of water, a fifth of the liquid freshwater on the surface of the planet, and that if all that water spilled across the land, it would cover the lower 48 states in a lake nearly ten feet deep.

You can drill those facts into impressionable young minds, write them on the walls, make them the subjects of exams and essays, but they’ll never have a fraction of the impact of leading kids to the shore and letting them discover for themselves that they can’t see across to the other side.

I’m not a teacher, but I know what teachers are up against. Americans’ famous ignorance of geography applies as much to the Great Lakes as it does to Paraguay and Cameroon. A friend of mine told me about a 30-year-old woman who works in his office and grew up in Escanaba, that small Michigan city on the north shore of Lake Michigan. When he asked her what it was like growing up there, she said it was great, wonderful, and that it was especially neat having Lake Superior in her front yard. “You mean Lake Michigan,” my friend said. “No, Lake Superior,” she said. He got a map and showed her. “Well, you learn something every day,” she said.

A few years ago, when a young man riding a personal watercraft ran out of gas on Lake Michigan near Chicago, he drifted for a day and a night

<sup>1</sup> Robert Michael Pyle, *The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland* (Lyons Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books, 2006).



before he was rescued by the Coast Guard. He was taken to a hospital to be treated for hypothermia, where a doctor noticed that he was also dangerously dehydrated. The doctor, baffled, asked why he didn't just drink the water. The young man was surprised by the question. He thought he had been on an ocean.

In 1615, Champlain laid eyes on Lake Huron for the first time, strode to the shore of Georgian Bay, and tasted it to see if it was saltwater. Exactly 390 years later, a party of Japanese visitors marched to the shore of Lake Michigan near Sleeping Bear Dunes and promptly tasted it for the same reason. They drove to the beach in Glen Arbor, and tasted it again. Then they drove to Empire and tasted it there, as well.

In an ideal world the facts would be enough to correct many of these kinds of misunderstandings, but I don't think we can hope to appeal to minds unless we appeal to hearts as well. The geography of a place is just lines on paper until its character or spirit or quiddity is somehow made tangible. Give people the experience of a place and the experience becomes something of their own, which makes the place seem like their own as well. They don't forget the experience or the ownership, and sometimes they begin to care.

That's the promise behind the Inland Seas Education Association in Suttons Bay. Since 1989 Tom Kelly and his staff have taken more than 70,000 kids aboard their school ship and given them hands-on experience with freshwater ecology. And it's making a difference. In Wisconsin recently I met a graduate student who told me that a single day on the school ship, when she was in sixth grade, inspired her to pursue a career in biology. Now she is researching loons on Isle Royale.

Getting kids outside is also what Kim Kaufman is doing at the Black Swamp Bird Observatory, on the Ohio shore of Lake Erie. When I visited this spring she told me that many of the kids that come on school trips to the observatory have never been out of the city. They cluster around her in the parking lot and at first refuse to set foot on the boardwalks leading into the woods and marshes. One girl asked if gorillas lived there. Another said in the haughty tone that only a twelve-year-old can muster, "I don't do nature." Yet, at the end of the day, those same children cried because they didn't want to leave.

The lesson is clear. If we're going to inspire stewards of the natural world, we somehow have to make that world real for them.

I don't know the best ways to do that, but I have some ideas. In my books I try to portray the places I care about as faithfully as a novelist portrays characters, with the hope that readers will care also and might someday come to their assistance.

I've also tried a few ideas on my kids. When they were young I really piled it on. They were tutored in the entire amateur naturalist's curriculum, from dragonflies to flycatchers, from smallmouthed salamander to largemouth bass. They were dragged along on canoe trips and snowshoe treks, on mushroom hunts, full-moon hikes, and aurora quests. Some of it stuck; most didn't. Both of my sons grew up to be fearless on computers and afraid of spiders, and more inclined to relax with a video game than a fly rod. But I'm betting that a few of the seeds I scattered will someday sprout.



Maybe that's the most that we can hope – and maybe that's enough. Albert Camus once wrote that a life's work is nothing but “the slow trek to rediscover those two or three great and simple images in whose presence [your] heart first opened.”

That's certainly true for many people I know. My brother fished, canoed, hiked, and mucked around in the same places I did, but his heart didn't open until he saw his first live theater performance. He moved to New York when he was 21 and has been designing sets for Broadway and television shows ever since.

Artist Glenn Wolff, whose illustrations grace the pages of the *New York Times* and many books about nature and the environment, including mine, and whose fine art is exhibited in galleries from New York to New Mexico, says his heart opened when his parents bought him a book of reproductions from Leonardo's sketchbooks.

Terrie Taylor, who went to high school a few years behind Glenn and me, spent a summer as a volunteer building houses in Appalachia, then had an “ah-ha!” moment in freshman biology that convinced her that she should devote her life to helping the underprivileged. She is now a doctor and runs a malaria research center in Malawi.

Cam Davis, the director of the Great Lakes Alliance, spent his summers as a child in a family-owned cabin in an idyllic setting in northern Wisconsin. When he saw the smoking industrial ruins across southern Lakes Michigan and Erie, he knew that something was wrong—and that something could be done about it.

I don't know if we can inspire others to care about the piping plover and Kirtland's warbler, about dunes ecosystems and water resources and climate change, but I know it's worth a try. Even just presenting the facts is worth a try, if only because, as Thoreau pointed out, a fact can sometimes blossom into a truth.

Should we teach by example rather than by rote? In my experience, that works best.

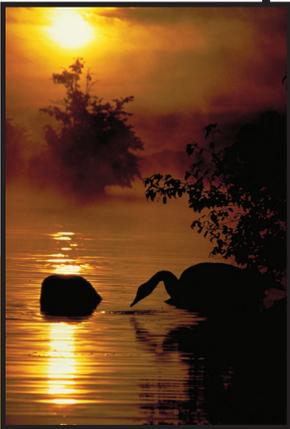
Do people respond better to being led than pushed? They seem to.

Will they follow you to a lakeshore or riverbank and wade into the water and begin to sense in their guts that everything is linked to everything else and that some of it needs our attention? Yes, sometimes. Can they be nudged toward a deeper appreciation of the world and a commitment to stewardship? Definitely.

If I've learned one thing as a battle-scarred veteran of parenthood and book-writing, it's this: We can't expect our children to open their hearts to the same great and simple images that shaped the lives of their parents and teachers. But if we're alert, and compassionate, and lucky, we can sometimes see them open their hearts to images of their own.

When that happens, a lot of the other stuff takes care of itself.

~End~





Jerry Dennis is the author, most recently, of the award-winning *The Living Great Lakes: Searching for the Heart of the Inland Seas*. He is spending a year living in houses on each of the Great Lakes while writing his new book, *A Watcher on the Shore*, funded by the Great Lakes Fishery Trust, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Wege Foundation



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Page 1: Girl on beach, Mary Whitmore (GLFT); Lake Michigan beach, Petoskey, Michigan (Michigan Travel Bureau); Lake Superior's North Shore, Minnesota (Minnesota Extension Service, Dave Hansen).

Page 2: Canoe and dock, Lake Superior Bark Bay, Wisconsin (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Karen Rodriguez); DTE Freshwater Institute students, Manistee, Michigan (Kevin Postma); Sunset over Put-in-Bay Harbor, Lake Erie, Put-in-Bay, Ohio (National Park Service, Perry's Victory and International Peace Memorial).

Page 3: Milkweed, unknown location (National Park Service, Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore); French River Hatcher Visitor Center, Duluth, Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Steve Geving); Lake Michigan beach, Frankfort, Michigan (Michigan Travel Bureau).

Page 4: Kent Lake, Kensington Metro Park, Milford, Michigan (Michigan Travel Bureau, Thomas A. Schneider); Lakeshore sunset, Lake Superior Dog Harbour, Ontario (Robert F. Beltran); Naturalists in field at a corporate site for Dupont Inc., Indiana (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Karen Holland).