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TEACHING THE MISSION

Addressing a Nature-Deficit Disorder

By Clint J. Springer

I was sitting by a small stream under a grove of Metasequoia trees. Suddenly, the sound of wings whooshing through the air caught my attention and a great blue heron landed on the stream's edge. After a few minutes of watching the bird fish for the catch of the day, it was time to rejoin my students. I was teaching after all.

Each spring I teach a course titled plant physiological ecology at Saint Joseph's University. The course's main focus is understanding the physiological and developmental responses of plants to their environment. In addition to lecture and lab activities, we spend a good deal of time talking about environmental problems to give context to the course material. One of the main focuses of this discussion is the human impacts on the environment, mainly global climate change. This course has always accomplished what I intended, teaching students about how plants grow and develop. However, after a few runs of the course, many of the comments I received from students asked for more focus on climate change and its consequences. I responded and adjusted the course material to feed this curiosity. After the first time running the course with the new material, I realized what the students were really asking for, a deeper connection to nature and the themes we were studying. Since many of our students come from urban and suburban environments, many of these biology students had not really had experienced nature in a deep and meaningful way. They had been awakened to their own "nature-deficit disorder," and it made them hungry for more.



In 2005, Richard Louv coined the phrase "nature-deficit disorder" in his award-winning book *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. In the book, Louv postulates that exposure to nature is key to the healthy mental, emotional, and physical development of both children and adults. He also postulates that many of contemporary environmental problems are directly related to the disconnect that exists between humans and the natural environment. My personal observations of my own students confirmed that these postulates held weight. So I set off to find a remedy that I hoped would enhance the emotional and physical needs of my students while also increasing their consciousness of their own impact on the environment.

First, I asked each student to calculate and reflect on their own environmental impact. I also gave a series of lectures on the church's teachings on human relationships and the environment. Finally, I implemented an exercise to truly connect the students with

nature in a deep and, albeit short, meaningful way. This exercise, which I call "an eco-spiritual retreat," takes students to a local botanical park and instructs them to spend one hour immersed in the natural environment without the distraction of the modern world. I ask the students to turn in their cell phones to me. I then ask them not to interact with their peers. The students see this as a daunting task, but the reflections that I receive show that they enjoy the "time away" and many have reported back that they have continued this exercise.

Sometimes, teaching the mission can be abstract for science faculty, but through some creativity and non-traditional science curriculum we can make great strides to this end. And take an afternoon off for our own mental health.

Clint Springer is an associate professor of biology and director of the Environmental Science Program at Saint Joseph's University.