

[From Spring 2007]

## **No Child Left Inside**

By Joyce Maher

Members of our refuge staff. Jill, Becky, Sally, and Laurel led by Kim Halpin invited me to attend a lecture by Richard Louv, author of the best selling book, "The Last Child in the Woods" last month in Ellicott City, Maryland. This was his 7th book, but by far the most successful, and he feels that success came because he touched upon an important value many people share. The talk entitled, "No Child Inside" was delivered to an auditorium filled to capacity. Louv discussed the importance of familiarizing children with the environment and instilling in them a love of wildlife, a reverence for nature and a sense of responsibility for the earth and all of its inhabitants.

Throughout the talk many topics from the book were discussed in depth, and the questions and comments brought new ones to light. Louv stated that studies have proven that learning disabilities are lessened in children who play outside in unpaved natural areas. He extrapolated this idea to suggest that New York City parks are considering revamping some areas and providing more green outdoor play opportunities to the city's children. A park commissioner has hired him as a consultant on designs of this kind. Self-reliance and confidence were qualities that children acquired by playing outside and enjoying a little independence from adults, he stated. And he went on to inform the audience that children who had early exposure to the outdoors generally enjoyed a lifelong love of nature.

While being fully aware that children must be watched and protected, he also felt some sense of freedom was important. On that note he suggested children should be warned to be careful, but allowed to have some time alone outdoors when their parents feel they are old enough. The terrorism over ticks, West Nile disease, and lots of other rather rare problems he feels are overly emphasized and make nature the "boogeyman" when that need not be so. Dress right, inspect bites and use common sense as people have been doing for years and you can enjoy nature.

One area that he is currently working on is getting developers interested in realizing the vital importance of leaving some empty fields and play places for the children as they plan new communities. He spoke of his caves and tree forts as a child in Kansas and suggested how beneficial these things were for him. A member of the audience added some information about the horrible air quality in classrooms across the nation and she feels there should be some redesigning there as well and that outdoor classrooms should be used, as they are in Europe, to help children learn in new ways.

Currently, Louv is a journalist in San Diego but travels widely spreading his message and looking for others to join with him in making changes to preserve the natural world.

We at the refuge, both staff and volunteers feel that educating children with this emphasis is extremely meaningful. That is why Kim Halpin is planning to offer a program this summer based on the ideals in the book and why we are selling Louv's book and Grace Cormon's SPARK books at our gift shop. Cormon is a local educator who has been running a nature-based family educational program right here on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Check out our books when you come visit this year.