

## Get Outdoors Florida!

By Bob Wattendorf Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

“Be it resolved that the Governor and Cabinet of the State of Florida do hereby recognize the Get Outdoors Florida! coalition and the Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights and encourage all Floridians and their families’ participation in outdoor activities throughout the year.”



*Charlie Crist and Cabinet Members pose with youth representing Get Outdoors Florida!*

With those words, Gov. Charlie Crist and his cabinet prompted a huge leap forward for agencies, nonprofits and private groups that have been working to make it easier for youth, families and entire communities to get back to nature.

The Get Outdoors Florida! coalition, does not receive direct funding from government agencies. However, agencies such as the Florida’s Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the departments of Environmental Protection (state parks), Agriculture and Consumer Services (state forests), Education, and Health are all actively involved. Their federal counterparts from the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are equally active, as are various universities,

nonprofit groups, commercial enterprises and individual citizens. The partners have all known for years that children are healthier and happier when they have active outdoor recreation. They do better in school and such children grow up with a better understanding of nature and what it takes to be good stewards of our resources. Many coalition partners have built their own programs to address these concerns, but now Get Outdoors Florida! is allowing them to come together more effectively and efficiently based on solid research and a list of guiding principles and best practices.



*Fishing is an all American tradition--little did we know when we were that age how good being outdoors was for us.*

Research published by the Children and Nature Organization has shown an array of major national health issues are related to reduced physical activity and to a reduced connection with nature. During the past 20 years, the amount of time children spend outdoors has been reduced 50

percent, with electronic media -- from TV to video games -- now accounting for an average of six hours of their time per day. Each hour of TV watched per day increases the likelihood of a child having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder by age seven by an astounding 10 percent. Other effects include obesity, attention deficit disorder, impaired social skills, higher stress levels, asthma and poorer performance in the classroom.

For a summary of this research see [www.GetOutdoorsFlorida.com](http://www.GetOutdoorsFlorida.com) and especially our links to the Children and Nature Network and National Wildlife Federation.

The New York Times reported on Andrea Faber Taylor's research at the Landscape and Human Health Laboratory at the University of Illinois, which suggests all children benefit from spending time in nature. This may be because the brain uses two forms of attention: "directed" attention to concentrate on work, reading and tests, and "involuntary" attention which takes over when we're distracted by things like running water, a beautiful sunset or watching a turtle slip into the water from a fallen log. Directed attention is limited and hours in front of a computer or playing video games can leave us feeling fatigued. Time spent in natural settings seems to activate involuntary attention, giving the brain's directed attention time to rest.

The Get Outdoors Florida! coalition brings many partners together to show how easy it is to offset these trends, by simply letting kids play outdoors. Whether it is an afternoon gardening and watching butterflies, a casual bream fishing trip, a walk in a county park, or a weekend camping adventure getting outdoors is important and brings numerous benefits to children, families and individuals. To make it even easier for parents and groups that want a new experience in nature, [www.GetOutdoorsFlorida.com](http://www.GetOutdoorsFlorida.com) lists simple activities and tips and provides a list of partners and events from all around the state that take advantage of Florida's year-round temperate climate to provide an unending array of opportunities. The focus is

on safe, active and ecologically sustainable nature-based activities which can be enjoyed for a lifetime—a lifetime that will be more enjoyable and last longer.

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