

# NATURAL PLAY & LEARNING AREA GUIDELINES PROJECT

A project of the National Wildlife Federation, the Natural Learning Initiative, and national partners to develop national design and management guidelines for natural areas in children's outdoor play and learning environments.



Bringing nature  
back into the daily  
lives of children.

## Project Overview

The purpose of the Natural Play and Learning Areas Guidelines Project is to improve children's health, happiness, and academic achievement by bringing nature to their daily outdoor play and learning environments. The guidelines will show managers of schools, parks, childcare centers, and public lands how to make nature a part of children's outdoor play and learning areas. The guidelines will identify the core elements of a natural play and learning area. Additionally they will demonstrate how to address management, liability, and accessibility issues. The Project will bring nature to thousands of children's play and learning environments by pursuing the following goals:

1. **Develop comprehensive guidelines** for designing and managing natural play and learning environments at all of the major settings where children play and learn—schools, childcare centers, residences, museums, botanical gardens, arboreta, zoos, nature centers, parks, and public lands.
2. **Promote the utilization of these guidelines** by professional associations, governments, regulatory bodies and others.
3. **Provide technical support and training** for those who create, use, and manage natural play and learning areas.
4. **Develop a vibrant and user-friendly website** that will publicize the guidelines and allow adopters to register and publicize the natural areas as they are constructed.

## Responding to the Crisis in Children's Health and Well-being

There is broad consensus in the scientific and public health community that time outdoors in nature is essential to children's physical health and general well-being. Active outdoor play protects children from a wide range of maladies associated with inactive, indoor childhoods that are currently on the rise, including obesity, diabetes, rickets, attention disorders, and depression. Today's generation of "indoor children"—spending an average of seven and a half hours a day using television, internet, video games, and cell phones—is sorely missing the physical, emotional, and developmental benefits of active outdoor play in natural settings. Research indicates that when children play and learn in nature, they do so with more vigor, engagement, imagination, and cooperation than children playing in wholly artificial environments and that symptoms of attention deficit and depression are reduced. Experts agree that children need access to nature the same way they need good nutrition and adequate sleep. Our project will help restore children's relationship with nature by bringing it back to the play and learning places of everyday life.

### Progress to Date

**Learning in Nature Corps on Public Lands** - In June 2011, National Wildlife Federation and Natural Learning Initiative partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to pilot the use of a designed natural play and learning area within a National Wildlife Refuge. College students were employed to form a Learning in Nature Corps (a Youth Conservation Corps initiative), where they were trained to design outdoor play and learning areas to engage and connect young people to the outdoors. These areas provided children and families with an experiential introduction to wildlife and wildlife habitats. Pending additional funding, the pilot will be expanded to other refuges in 2012.

**Natural Play and Learning Areas Design Guidelines** - In an effort funded by the US Forest Service, NWF and NLI will develop design guidelines for use by a wide range of institutions (parks, museums, nature centers, child care centers) and will pilot these guidelines at demonstration sites. The draft guidelines will be released for public comment in the summer of 2012 and issued in final form in the fall of 2012. The demonstration sites, in Jackson, Mississippi, Kalamazoo, Michigan, Holland, Michigan, and Johnson City, Texas, will be completed in 2013.

### Participating Organizations

The National Wildlife Federation and the Natural Learning Initiative at North Carolina State University lead and administer the project. Fourteen leading national organizations serve on the project steering committee, aiding in the development and promotion of the guidelines. Organizations include the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Centers for Disease Control, the Chicago Park District, the Children & Nature Network, the City Park Alliance, Head Start Body Start National Center for Physical Development and Outdoor Play, the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, Keep America Beautiful, the National Arbor Day Foundation/Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, the National Association of State Park Directors, the National Recreation and Parks Association, the North American Association for Environmental Education, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. PLAY Coalition.



If there is a natural play and learning area that you would like to bring to our attention or if you would like more information about the project please contact:

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