

Healthy environment

Nature therapy

Look no further than your own backyard to discover the natural delights of the Ontario Greenbelt

THOMAS BOLLMANN



Back to Mother Nature: Playing outdoors benefits families physically and emotionally—from left, Wyatt Hogarth, 4; Nicholas Ridge and Ethan D'sa, both 9, at the Kortright Centre for Conservation.

There is a fundamental link between health and nature, declares David Love, executive director of The Conservation Foundation of Greater Toronto, which funds projects that promote the understanding, enjoyment and protection of the environment.

According to Love, GTA residents live in an enviable position: unlike many cities in the world, ours is surrounded by a large Greenbelt. "We underestimate the benefits that [nature] provides," he observes.

We're missing out if we cannot remember the last time we visited Riverdale Farm; cycled the bike paths along the lakeshore or up the Don River; explored the numerous Greenbelt hiking trails, provincial parks and conservation areas in and around the GTA. But more importantly, our children could well be missing a vital ingredient for their health and well-being.

American journalist Richard Louv would heartily agree. In his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books, 2005), Louv warns about the consequences of cutting off today's kids from their natural surroundings. His term "nature-deficit disorder" is a call to

action to counteract "the human cost of alienation from nature"—anxiety, depression, obesity, attention disorders and other ailments.

Recent studies reinforce his point. According to research in 2010 from the National Environmental Education Foundation, in Washington, D.C., exposure to nature improves mood and attention focus—particularly in children with attention deficit disorders—and alleviates asthma. Meanwhile, the *American Journal of Health Education* released findings last year showing that being outdoors reduces stress, blood pressure, heart rate and muscle tension for adults and children alike. Mother Nature also plays a key role in the early development of creativity, problem-solving and motor skills.

The outdoors is a given in the life of the Hogarth family—Tanya, 35, Steve, 40, Wyatt, 4, and Corben, 2. Although they live on a 100-acre dairy farm in Troy, just outside of Hamilton, in the Ontario Greenbelt, the Hogarths take the time to explore other natural environments in the GTA. They also participate in the outdoor game of geocaching, often described as "high-tech hide-and-seek." Says Tanya, "We originated outdoors; we need to be outdoors."

Her mindset would resonate with author Louv. "Human beings haven't caught up with today's over-stimulating environment," he writes in *Child in the Woods*.

"Contact with nature is as important to children as good nutrition and adequate sleep."

It can also be a natural source of entertainment. Tanya notes, "I'd rather the kids be outside than on a computer or a couch in front of the TV." Yet, Canadian children spend more than 40 hours a week of free time in front of a screen, according to the 2011 report card on physical activity levels for chil-

dren and youth, released by Active Healthy Kids Canada last month.

When children unplug from the computerized world and immerse themselves in nature, they get hands-on learning, whether it's discovering where their food comes from during a visit to a pick-your-own-farm, finding out what the forest sounds like, catching a frog in the wetlands, or catching sight of a falling star away from the glare of city lights. "What they discover is [that] the world is a magical place," David Love says. "They learn to share their surroundings with other creatures great and small, and that

we're all together on this planet."

Getting out there and into our Greenbelt is good for the environment, too. Just ask Toronto-born naturalist and wildlife artist Robert Bateman. "We desperately need people who are passionate about the environment," says Bateman, who founded the Get to Know Program in 2000, an educational initiative committed to helping youth connect with the natural world.

"But if young people don't get to know their wild neighbours, they won't care... How can you care about something when you don't even know its name?"

Nature is nurture

Prevent nature deficit with an all-natural prescription

Follow the food trail Visit a Greenbelt farmers' market or a pick-your-own farm to enjoy local vegetables and fruits at their best and freshest—strawberries, peas, cucumbers, lettuce, beans and more. farmersmarketsontario.com, harvestontario.com, greenbeltfresh.ca

Hike, bike, treasure-hunt Discover the hundreds of miles of trails for walking, hiking and biking in and around the Ontario Greenbelt. Find out how to participate in geocaching. greenbelt.ca, ontariotrails.on.ca, ontgeocaching.com, biketrain.ca, tourismniagara.ca

Get wild about wildlife Meet Mother Nature up close—learn firsthand about songbirds, frogs, fish and other creatures of the wild—at one of the Ontario's Greenbelt's many conservation areas. Check out local events. trca.on.ca, gettoknow.ca and greenbelt.ca



MARTIE GIEFERT

Green behind the lens

With over 12 million visitors, the successful outdoor Harbourfront Centre photo exhibit, *Beyond Imaginings*, has been extended to run until June 2012. The exhibit documents the forests, fields and farmlands of the Ontario Greenbelt.

Beyond Imaginings features eight contemporary photographers who created 72 large-scale images focusing on the Greenbelt's 1.8 million acres (728,000 hectares) wrapped around the Golden Horseshoe.

Each photographer explored three sections: Working the Land, Natural Beauty, and People of the Greenbelt. The extended show will feature 24 new images, and is open to the public 24/7.

The Ontario Greenbelt, created by legislation in February 2005, is committed to protecting key environmentally sensitive land and farmlands. According to a recent Environics poll, public awareness of the importance of the Greenbelt is growing.

For more information and to see *Beyond Imaginings* online, go to harbourfrontcentre.com.

This sponsored feature is the fifth in a six-part series. Look for the next one on Wednesday, June 22, 2011.

Ontario local food champion

Spud 2.0

New food technology ups the environmental ante for Greenbelt packing plant

A cutting-edge industrial potato peeler that uses 80 per cent less water than standard equipment is the latest development at Cohn Farms, which processes, packs and delivers local crops to markets across Ontario.

To further decrease its carbon footprint, Cohn Farms—located near the town of Bradford, north-west of Toronto—acquired the "waterless" peeler, which washes and chops more than 20,000 lbs. of potatoes a day, thanks in part to a \$350,000 grant from the Greenbelt Fund.

Overall expansion is also planned for the plant. This would give as many as 30 local farmers access to the latest equipment

in food packing and processing, such as the German-developed peeler, which Larry Cohn believes is the first to be used in Canada. The farmers will also benefit from a bigger marketplace with a consolidated distribution network.

"One of [our] major goals is to help smaller farmers get their products to broader public-sector institutions," explains Cohn, who operates the family farm and plant with his brother, Keith. "We're [also] trying to raise the bar on food safety a couple of feet."

Like Cohn Farms, many participating farmers have the "certified local sustainable" endorsement from Local Food Plus, a non-profit group promoting environmen-



Larry Cohn in the processing plant of his family's third-generation farm.

tally and socially responsible food production. What this means too, explains Cohn, is that he will be able "to trace any produce back to the field it was grown in and who touched it."

Expanding the packing plant will allow the Cohns to process other vegetables—broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, peppers, celery and beets—in addition to the potatoes, onions and carrots that they grow themselves.

Opening up larger markets to small farmers, many located in the Greenbelt, ensures that a wider assortment of fresh local produce gets to Ontario's daycares, schools, hospitals and long-term care facilities. "It's a win-win," notes Cohn.

"If someone in Thunder Bay needs cauliflower, [with] our distribution network, they will get it," he explains. And, he adds, with the consolidation of loads, there will be "less truck on the roads."

Discover the next Ontario local food champion

Visit greenbelt.ca to nominate a star in the local food movement



Possibility grows here