



Fighting ecophobia along the border

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Driving through sheets of rain across the Sacramento River last week, I looked out at the endless expanse of floodwaters creeping across the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, and was awed by the new and spreading sea.

This week, the waters continue to rise, and, as the San Francisco Chronicle reported Monday, “government officials admit they have their fingers crossed that the system of flood barriers that has been starved for maintenance funding will survive the next few months and beyond without a disaster.”

So it goes. Mother Nature, not terrorists, will likely define the 21st century. Odd, then, that the 26th annual Earth Day, to be celebrated on Saturday, will likely come and go with the obligatory headlines, and a collective yawn. One reason is disaster fatigue. Another reason is that nature has become an abstraction to the young, who seldom venture into it.

Shara Fisler is doing her part to help kids get real, by training 100 volunteer coordinators on Earth Day for a major binational eco-event a week later.

Each year, Fisler, the hyperkinetic, charismatic, young leader of San Diego's Aquatic Adventures Science Education Foundation, helps introduce some 6,000 children and young adults, mostly from tough neighborhoods, to the natural world. Teams of students have tested water quality, gone on research vessel excursions, snorkeled through kelp forests, helped scientists collect invertebrates, and labored to restore four canyons of our region's watershed.

On April 29, while other San Diegans continue to argue about immigration, Aquatic Adventures and other U.S. and Mexican nongovernment groups plan to rally 1,000 volunteers, mainly schoolchildren and their families from both Tijuana and San Diego, who will conduct habitat restoration on both sides of the border.

“Participants will be working side by side, but often not in view of one another, due to the border fence,” says Fisler. We need to clone her, and others like her. They may be the best antidote we have to ecophobia – the paralyzing fear of ecological destruction – a term coined by David Sobel, co-director of the Center for Place-based Education at Antioch's New England Graduate School.

“Between the end of morning recess and the beginning of lunch, schoolchildren will learn that more than 10,000 acres of rain forest will be cut down.” These children will, in theory, “learn that by recycling their Weekly Readers and milk cartons, they can help save the planet.” Or will they?

Sobel found that an emphasis on doom and gloom too early “ends up distancing children from, rather than connecting them with, the natural world.” Emotionally, they turn off – particularly because they have so little experience in nature; they learn about the rain forest, but usually not about their own region's forests or the meadow outside their classroom.

While young people do need to know about ecological deterioration at some point, they also need to hear a broader, more optimistic message about creating the future, and they need to get outdoors more. In surveys of environmental leaders, most “attributed their commitment to a combination of two sources: many hours spent outdoors in a keenly remembered wild or semi-wild place in childhood or adolescence, and an adult who taught respect for nature,” according to Louise Chawla, environmental psychologist and international coordinator of the Growing Up in Cities program of UNESCO.

A more recent study by researchers at Cornell University revealed that “wild” nature play before age 11 fosters adult environmentalism. “When children become truly engaged with the natural world at a young age, the experience is likely to stay with them in a powerful way – shaping their subsequent environmental path,” reports environmental psychologist Nancy Wells.

If coming generations spend less and less time outdoors, where will the future stewards of the earth come from? In recent months, several major environmental organizations have stepped up their commitment to connecting children to nature.

Fisler will continue to reach young people who have never even touched the ocean, let alone explored an estuary. On Sept. 29, her Aquatic Avengers, as she calls them, will work to restore a sub-watershed that begins in Mexico and empties into the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve in San Diego, one of the most biologically important wetlands in America.

Under normal circumstances, the U.S. and Mexican students and their families laboring to clean up the estuary, on both sides of the border, would be within shouting distance, but unable to see each other. But Fisler isn't about to let an international border get in her way. Aquatic Adventures and sponsors will erect, on the Mexican side, a giant, 25-foot-by-16-foot TV screen – 40 feet above the border fence, so that Aquatic Avengers on both sides of the border can see what their counterparts are up to.

Talk about acting locally and thinking globally.