

**PCEE Director a Panelist at
Pennsylvania Association of Environmental Educators Event**

The Play Imperative: Restoring the Nature of Childhood

SLIPPERY ROCK, PA – [April 18, 2007] – Are today’s children being harmed by the absence of unstructured outdoor play? Does reduced time spent in nature contribute to the increase of childhood asthma, diabetes, obesity and Attention Deficit Disorder? How can society restore the balance between structured and unstructured play?

Kathleen Paul, Director of the Pennsylvania Center for Environmental Education (PCEE), and Melissa Reynolds, PCEE’s Education Programs Coordinator were among the environmental educators who participated in the discussion of these and other concerns at a special event held recently at St. Vincent’s College in Latrobe. Ms. Paul was a member of the panel of experts who joined speaker, Ken Finch, in a discussion after his talk.

The event, “The Play Imperative: Restoring the Nature of Childhood,” was sponsored by the Pennsylvania Association of Environmental Educators, one of three such discussions held throughout the state that week. Mr. Finch is the President and founder of Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood, a new non-profit organization dedicated to bringing children and nature back together. Green Hearts’ philosophy is based on research that reveals that frequent, unstructured childhood play in wild spaces is the most common influence on the development of life-long conservation values.

“The research cited at this event indicates that free time in nature is a necessary part of growing happy, healthy children who will become tomorrow’s environmental stewards,” said Ms. Paul. “I suspect that future research will also discover a correlation between time spent in unstructured nature play and “resiliency” — a person’s ability to rebound from difficult stressors and experiences. Thoreau and others have told us about the important role that nature can play in healing and calming adults. We’re only now starting to understand just how important natural experiences are for our children as well.”

In his presentation, Finch asked the audience to think back to their childhoods and their own fond memories of “mucking about outdoors”—before pointing out that children today are much less likely to spend a significant amount of time engaged in unstructured play in a natural setting. He cited several reasons for this, including the over-booking of children’s time for structured activities (organized sports, extracurricular educational activities, etc.), a fascination with technological gadgets (computers, etc.), and parents’ fear that their children will be harmed or abducted by strangers if they’re not under constant supervision (although the number of children actually abducted by strangers each year has remained roughly the same for the past two decades).

At the same time that this shift has been occurring, many physical and psychological childhood ailments have been on the rise, including childhood diabetes and obesity, asthma, and Attention Deficit Disorder. Finch cited literature indicating that these problems have increased as children have begun spending significantly less time playing out-of-doors. Finch also expressed concern that the next generation will have less empathy for the environment as adults if they aren't permitted to experience it as children, because "children only come to really understand how the environment works if they first have the opportunity to explore and grow to love it on their own terms."

The panel concluded that educators and parents can encourage "nature exploration" by:

- "Greening" the school playground with diverse, natural settings;
- Offering preschool programs with limited academic structure but with lots of room for nature exploration; and
- Making parents aware of the importance of unstructured nature play.

"PCEE's mission is to link Pennsylvanian's with environmental resources," noted Ms. Paul. "Our job is to help make parents and educators aware of the importance of getting children outdoors—and then to help them find great natural places where kids and their families can go outside and play."

About PCEE: The Pennsylvania Center for Environmental Education (PCEE) was created by Executive Order of the Governor in 1997 to "provide an avenue for increased participation by educators, local officials, citizen and non-profit groups, business and industry as partners in the implementation of quality environmental education on a state-wide basis." Administered by the PA State System of Higher Education, PCEE is housed at Slippery Rock University.

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