

County hopes to help families get back to nature

'Plug into Nature' public input sessions planned Nov. 3-5

By Jessica Benes Reporter-Herald Staff Writer
Loveland Reporter-Herald

Posted:10/27/2011 08:50:12 PM MDT

On a cool fall day, Gwynn Marks, age 4, learned about skulls at a picnic table surrounded by gold and brown leaves at Devil's Backbone Open Space.

Mary Joyce Fink, volunteer naturalist with Larimer County Parks and Open Space, showed Gwynn different skulls made of plastic at a "Tiny Trekkers" program. Tiny Trekkers will start up again in April and is one of many open lands programs for children and adults.

On a larger scale, families are invited to add input on programs at several "Plug into Nature" sessions held Nov. 3 through 5.

The Plug into Nature project has been a yearlong study by Larimer County to gather information on the connection families and youths have to the outdoors.

If You Go

Share ideas at one of the upcoming community meetings. Input will help create solutions for addressing a trend called "Nature Deficient Disorder" in which kids and families are not fully benefiting from all that nature has to offer. Food and drinks will be provided, as well as activities for all ages.

Thursday, Nov. 3, noon-1 p.m.,
Council Tree Library, 2733
Council Tree Ave., Fort Collins.

Thursday, Nov. 3, 5-6 p.m.,
Leeper Community Center, 3800
Wilson Ave., Wellington.

Friday, Nov. 4, 12:30-1:30 p.m.,
Estes Park Library, 335 E.
Elkhorn Ave.

Friday, Nov. 4, 5:30-6:30 p.m.,
North Side Aztlan Center, 112 E.
Willow St., Fort Collins.

Saturday, Nov. 5, 5-6 p.m., Oak
Room at the Chilson Recreation
Center, 700 E. Fourth St.,
Loveland.

For details, call 679-4561.

Great Outdoors Colorado is funding the project and hopes to increase participation of youths and families outside.

Rob Novak said a public survey showed that folks in the county feel a connection to nature -- 75 percent of parents want their children to spend more time outdoors -- but just don't have the time.

"People understand the benefits of getting kids outside but don't seem to be making it a priority for whatever reason," Novak said.

He encourages families to attend the meetings so they can delve into the time issue and other worries, such as location, safety and preferable times of day.

At the meetings, parents will use a keypad instant polling device. Questions will be asked, the adults will click their answers and the responses will appear instantly on the interactive screen.

Games and activities will also be provided for children, so parents don't have to find child care to add input.

"The younger they start, the more they appreciate nature and will want to come back as they grow up," Mary Joyce Fink said. The volunteers that lead the Tiny Trekkers program encouraged families to take advantage of the easy trails after the program.

She noticed the different relationships that developed among families out in nature. They walked together; the parents didn't have immediate responsibilities; children focused on what was in front of them at the moment and stress levels went down.

"What do you think this is?" Fink asked Gwynn during the Monday program. Gwynn looked blank, so Fink added, "It's something that chews on trees."

"A beaver!" Gwynn said.

Fink also showed her the skulls of a human head, coyote and black bear, and explained the differences in facial features and teeth among the mammals.

"We're seeing whole generations who would rather stay inside plugged into

something electrical instead of something natural," Fink said.

Naturalist programs fire children's imaginations, she added. They see, discover, question, handle. The outdoors develops a different way of thinking and sparks creativity and observation skills.

"It's especially important to tune into the seasons," Fink said. "Certain things look different at different times of the year. We forget that there's this part of the world."

Novak said that the Tiny Trekkers program was started because there wasn't a program like it in Loveland. It has been popular, and leaders hope to do more programs like it in the future.

"There's not a single aspect of kids' development that isn't enhanced outside," Novak said.

He said that children tend to do better in group activities and are more positive, creative and healthy when encouraged to play outside.

"It also translates into skills later in life, like math and science," Novak said.

He said that the solution to getting families outside has to be community-based. "The only way this will work is if we get people (to the meetings)," Novak said.

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Volunteers fill a variety of needs on Larimer County lands

By Pamela Dickman Reporter-Herald Staff Writer
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Posted: 10/20/2011 02:37:08 PM MDT

DEVIL'S BACKBONE -- Gale Bernhardt broke into a huge smile and stopped her mountain bike in its tracks when she spotted Everett Carlson on the trail west of Loveland.

"Well, hi, Everett," exclaimed the Loveland woman, who rides the trail twice a week and often runs into the volunteer ranger assistant, who frequents the same route talking to visitors, educating people about taking care of the land and, himself, caring for the land.

"It's just cool that there's people like this in our community," said Bernhardt.

Carlson is just one of thousands of volunteers who give even more hours each year to natural areas, nonprofits and other causes in Larimer County.

United Way of Larimer County, alone, matched 10,000 people to volunteer projects this year. And volunteering is so prevalent in Larimer County that National Make A Difference Day (Saturday), has spread to an entire week with nearly 4,000 people undertaking about 100 projects throughout the county this week.

Carlson volunteers every week for the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources, one of many who undertake various tasks from building trails to answering phones to protect our county's open spaces and natural areas.

Everett Carlson

Who is he? An 80-year-old Loveland man who retired in 1991 from a career working inside with machines and tools.

What he does? Hikes the Devil's Backbone -- a trail he helped build as a volunteer over a decade ago -- and educates visitors on how to protect the trail and serves as an ambassador to those who enjoy the open space. He may explain why it is important to keep dogs on leash, not to litter or to stay off the rocks themselves at the backbone.

Why he volunteers? Hiking the trails keeps Everett active for his health and allows him to meet people from across the country and world, but most of all, helps protect our beautiful natural resources.

What he says: "It's just very rewarding ... It's absolutely wonderful. It keeps some natural stuff around."

Jeff Anderson

Who is he? A 47-year-old controller for a plumbing company, who moved to Fort Collins two years ago.

What he does? Shares his passion for photography with the community by taking pictures of different events, rangers and volunteers at the regional open spaces and of the natural landscapes themselves. He devoted 35 hours this summer to chronicle open lands.

Why he volunteers? With a firm appreciation of nature, Jeff loves to learn even more about wildlife and wildlands as he volunteers and he wants to do what he can to help.

What he says: "We are so fortunate to live in an area where they protect these lands, and they are so accessible. This is mother nature in its purest, rawest form."

Ernie Pope

Who is he? The 76-year-old volunteer naturalist, and Fort Collins resident, worked in chemical analysis for 26-years before retiring.

What he does? "Anything they ask," he says, but his most recent project is monitoring rattlesnake populations in the parking lot at Red Mountain Open Space north of Fort Collins. Like salmon, rattlesnakes are drawn back to the dens where they

were born. Pope records to the number of snakes around old dens in the parking lot and where they go so wildlife managers can have data to back up their decisions.

Why he volunteers? Natural areas and history are very important to Pope, who through his volunteer work, helps further both nature and history in one of the state's original 17 counties.

What he says: "Sooner or later, it's time to give back. It's a cliché, but its true ... Our children need a place to play. They need to be free. They need to experience (nature), and they need to get away from their computer screens."

Tom and Barb Garland

Who are they? A retired nurse and a retired salesmen of metal tubular products, the 76-year-olds moved here in 2005 and began a life of volunteerism.

What they do? The couple spends the summer on the docks of Carter Lake, helping boaters launch and dock their vessels and offering information, among other volunteer commitments throughout the region.

Why they volunteer? After retiring here from the Midwest, the couple decided they now had the time to give back to the community and to the natural lands they love.

What he says: "Here in Colorado we still have the opportunity to tuck this away for years to come and for future generations.

What she says: "It just makes us feel good."

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