

By Dean Houghton

No child left inside

4-H Clubs introduce kids to a world of nature



Aldo Leopold, the noted conservationist, was among the first to recognize that technology can make life easier, but not any richer. “The outstanding scientific discovery of the 20th century is not television,” he wrote, “but rather the complexity of the land organism. Only those who know the most about it can appreciate how little is known about it.”

In Michigan, volunteer 4-H Club leaders Joe and Theresa Whitenight are helping kids learn a little about nature while they learn a lot about themselves. Through their work with several 4-H Outdoor Adventure Challenge Clubs, the Whitenights help teach various physically and mentally challeng-

ing outdoor activities ranging from canoeing to rock climbing to outdoor survival skills. “It helps teach kids the skills necessary to handle stressful situations that can come up in life,” Theresa says. “Young people gain a sensitivity and appreciation for the environment and for themselves, and they learn it in the biggest classroom of all—the outdoors.”

Up and moving. The 4-H Club youth organization has been around a long time, tracing its roots to the early 1900s. The clubs linked up with the National Cooperative Extension Service when it was formed in 1914, helping to forge a link between a state’s 4-H Clubs and its land-grant college or university. By

Above: Dresden Elementary 4-H Outdoor Adventure Challenge Club canoeists learn basic strokes along with teamwork. **Right:** Club members Tessa Maskeny and Nycki Keating try ice fishing on Anchor Bay.

1936, 4-H Clubs claimed more than a million members across the nation. Those early clubs emphasized projects such as livestock, gardening, sewing, cake baking, and canning.

Those projects are still popular. But there’s been a growing effort to get kids off the couch and back in touch with nature. “Children today know little about their own local ecosystems,” says Judy Ratkos, program leader for 4-H Youth Development at Michigan State University. “They are disconnected from the



PHOTOS: JOE WHITENIGHT



Above: Michigan 4-H'er Veronica Towianski rappels down a rock on the state's Upper Peninsula.

world outside their doors despite being more connected around the globe through electronic media. Outdoor learning is essential for developing environmental stewardship."

The Whitenights are finding that, in many cases, too much time spent holding a video game controller has resulted in kids that are simply out of shape. "This trip was probably the most physically demanding week of my life," wrote one 4-H'er in a journal entry following an outdoor challenge. "We hiked 36 miles, and 75% of it was uphill."

Building confidence. Joe Whitenight says that he and Theresa require kids to talk about and write down their reflections following the day's activities. "We call it processing," he says. "It's a regular part of what we do at the end of the day. You can see how the ex-

periences are building self-confidence in the young people." For example, one 4-H'er went to a rock climbing session and wrote: "We learned a lot more than just rock climbing skills. We also learned to have self respect. We all had to believe in ourselves and we had to push ourselves to do it."

Science, engineering, and technology are another emphasis for 4-H Clubs. The national organization has set a goal of preparing a million kids by 2013 for a career in these fields. The 4-H program is one of the leading sources of informal, out-of-school science education, the kind of experiences that can influence a young person's career choice. Of course, there are more than 2 million 4-H'ers involved in animal science projects, and nearly three-quarters of a million in plant science projects.

Top right: Many typical 4-H projects, from livestock production to gardening, give kids more chances for outdoor activity. **Right:** Taking a break in a trout stream, 4-H'ers rinse in the cold water of the Yellow Dog River.

For more information on getting kids involved in 4-H Clubs, you can visit 4-H.org, or your county Extension office can direct you to one.

The Whitenights say they've seen a number of positive effects since they first became outdoor-challenge leaders in 2000. "We've seen these young people develop a sense of responsibility," Joe says. "They've learned the basics of 'leave no trace' camping, and generally developed a sense of stewardship. We've seen a couple of our young people go on to attend West Point, others have studied environmental sciences in college. So we definitely think it's having an impact." **H**

