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Nature Recreation at All-Time Low

*First-of-its-kind global study shows “a real and fundamental shift” away from nature,
Local Conservation Leaders Affirm Findings*

ARLINGTON, VA — New Nature Conservancy-funded research shows that across the U.S. and in other developed nations, people are spending far less time outdoors than ever before. The study will be published Feb. 5 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Researchers say this study -- the most comprehensive look yet at nature recreation -- is a “grim confirmation” of a long-held theory that people, especially children, are spending less time in the great outdoors.

“As a scientist and a conservationist, I find these results almost terrifying,” said Oliver Pergams, assistant professor of biological sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago and lead author of the study. “We are seeing a fundamental shift away from people’s interest in nature, not just in the U.S. but in other countries, too. The consequences of this could be deep and far-ranging for health, for human well-being, and for the future of the planet.”

The research builds on earlier studies that showed visits to American national parks were declining, and it illustrates that the problem isn’t limited to parks – and isn’t just found in the United States.

This new study includes data on camping, backpacking, fishing, hiking, hunting, visits to national and state parks and forests. Pergams and fellow researcher Patricia Zaradic found comparable, reliable statistics from Japan and, to a lesser extent, Spain. They found that beginning between 1981 and 1991 there was a decline in per capita nature recreation, dropping at rates ranging from one to 1.3 percent per year, depending on the activity studied. The typical drop in nature use since then has been between 18 and 25 percent.

Stephanie Meeks, acting president and CEO of The Nature Conservancy, noted, “If we lose our connection to the natural world, we’ll lose our appreciation for the food, water, and clean air it provides. And the next generation will feel little compulsion to protect it. We’re facing the most serious environmental threats of our lifetime, particularly in light of the challenges posed by climate change. We need the next generation to both value the natural world in which we live and fight to protect it.”

Helen Taylor, state director in Michigan for The Nature Conservancy, agrees with Meeks and noted that our year-round activities to connect with nature in Michigan are affordable, healthy and lead to a better appreciation for the outdoors and our state.

“The connection to place is a powerful one,” Taylor said. “I have never had a good answer to the question ‘What person has inspired you most in your life?’ It is places that have had the greatest influence on me and that feeling of connectivity with the world that those places brought me.”

Taylor noted that taking her own children to places like preserves owned by The Nature Conservancy has strengthened her personal connection to place, and has given her sons a chance at “truly interactive learning” by walking trails, listening for bird calls and seeing signs of new life in the spring.

In previous studies, Pergams and Zaradic found the decline in natural experiences correlated with a rise in playing video games, surfing the Internet and watching movies. The researchers call this recent focus on sedentary activities involving electronic media “videophilia.”

Peter Kareiva, Chief Scientist for The Nature Conservancy, added, “Today, the majority of humans live in cities, and urbanization is accelerating so rapidly that by 2050 only a small portion of the human population will live outside urban areas. This disconnect could have severe consequences for all of us.”

In Michigan, The Nature Conservancy posts directions to 17 of its 37 preserves online at nature.org/michigan. These preserves are open to the public, offering trails for hiking or snow-shoeing or simply observing wildlife. To find a preserve near you, visit <http://nature.org/michigan>.

For a full version of the new study, visit http://videophilia.org/declining_nature.html

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The Nature Conservancy is a leading conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for nature and people. To date, the Conservancy and its more than one million members have been responsible for the protection of more than 15 million acres in the United States and have helped preserve more than 102 million acres in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific. Visit The Nature Conservancy on the Web at www.nature.org.

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