

Youth & Families » Steps into Wilderness

WTA's new program helps youth get outdoors



Members of the Horn of Africa Services youth group with Chris Wall, WTA's youth programs coordinator, on the Rattlesnake Ledge Trail

For more information about Steps into Wilderness visit www.wta.org/kids/steps



Chris Wall

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Most of us can agree that kids today are not spending enough time outside. Science has linked childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder, depression, and even nearsightedness to spending too much time indoors. With our increasingly high-tech society, the digital distractions that face children today are as abundant as the problems caused by the subsequent sedentary lifestyles.

Before we point fingers at the Xbox, television and computer, let's think about why kids aren't going outdoors. Yes, technology entralls us, but is it actually more fun than catching frogs or splashing in puddles? What else might be causing children to stay inside?

We all know that one way children learn is by watching adult behavior. Is it surprising that a 2005 Environmental Protection Agency study found most adults spend 90 percent of their lives indoors? Apparently kids aren't the only ones spending too much time inside. We all have to encourage youth through our own actions and take responsibility for providing outdoor access. A 2004 Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) study found that 90 percent of outdoor recreation enthusiasts started outdoor activities before age eighteen. A 2008 OIA study also found parents, family, and friends were the most influential in encouraging kids to start outdoor activities. Our duty as adults therefore is not only to encourage children to get outside, but to take them with us!

As readers of this magazine and avid hikers, you are most likely already motivating your kids to get outside. Unfortunately, however, in the

words of WTA's Elizabeth Lunney, "not all kids are born with hiking boots on their feet." There are still millions of kids not getting exposed to the joys of hiking.

WTA has been developing partnerships with Seattle youth organizations to increase youth access to the outdoors. Fall 2009 marked the introduction of WTA's Steps into Wilderness program which is aimed at getting more youth age thirteen to eighteen outdoors and hiking.

This new program offers mentorship and outdoor leadership training to community leaders looking to establish a new hiking program or improve their existing one. Collaborating with partners, WTA empowers local leaders to engage youth through hiking instruction, fun activities and community service. By mentoring youth leaders, WTA aspires to impact an even greater number of youth than our current programs reach. Our hope is that Steps into Wilderness will encourage the next generation to become lifelong hikers of the trail systems that WTA and its volunteers help maintain and protect.

WTA is actively seeking out new Steps into Wilderness partners. To date, we have partnered with Horn of Africa Services and Seattle Parks and Recreation with more partnerships on the horizon. If you know a youth organization that would benefit from this program, please let us know by contacting chrisw@wta.org. After all, more partners mean more hikers, more youth on trail and more time our staff will spend outside sharing the joys of hiking! ♦