

For the Children, For the Future

Literacy Isn't Just About Reading and Writing, Anymore

by MARY O. PARKER



Photo courtesy of Coastal Bend Habitat Educational Program

In addition to its classroom program, *Kritters 4 Kids* offers a *Kritter Kamp*, which includes bug hunts, learning about tracks, dissecting owl pellets, building bird houses and other “cool-to-kids” activities.



Photo by Leslie Wittenburg

Koy Coffer (center) leads TWA's L.A.N.D.S. Intensive program. “We want to do more,” she said. “There are schools waiting in line.”

TWA member Bruce Hoffman visited a group of 24 third graders near Corpus Christi and watched as they grew more enthralled with each full-color image – Collared Peccary, Nine-banded Armadillos, Osprey, Crested Caracara, and much more – all of it native Texas wildlife, all of it beautifully photographed.

Hoffman, who's served as president of Coastal Bend Habitat Educational Program (CBHEP) for three years, recounted: “They'd say, ‘Wow! That looks scary! Where's it from? Africa or something?’ I'd look over, and the child would be looking at a bobcat or coyote that lives right here in the Coastal Bend.”

The Coastal Bend Wildlife Photo Contest and the *Kritters 4 Kids Program* both reside under CBHEP's non-profit umbrella. At first glance, a photo contest and a children's educational program might not seem to have much in common, but look again.

“We use *Wildlife in Focus*, the book we create from the winning contest images, along with a TEKS-based curriculum for our *Kritters 4 Kids Program*,” Hoffman explained.

TEKS stands for “Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills,” and refers to a set of standards mandated by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for each subject and grade level. Since *Kritters 4 Kids* began in 2002, it has delivered TEA's science TEKS to children in nearly 200 Texas schools. As of February 2013, 20 others wait to participate, but, said Hoffman, “We're shallow on the funding needed to hire staff to reach more schools.”

Ask Hoffman about *Kritters 4 Kids*, and watch his face light up. He believes in this program, because it exposes kids to the flora and fauna that live in their own environments. “If we can get kids at a young age to look at these photographs, to

learn about the animals that we have right here in Texas, eyeball to eyeball, they might want to take better care of what we have out there,” he said.

“Young people just aren't getting out there, getting outside, doing things where they can understand the circle of life, that animals eat other animals, that some animals eat plants, that plants need sun,” he said. Then, with a grin, added, “You know, the science TEKS!”

Hoffman refers to a phenomenon known as “nature-deficit disorder,” a phrase coined by author Richard Louv and now widely used, thanks to Louv's 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods*. Louv's research-based best-seller put a name to a problem that had already troubled many: children are spending less and less time in nature, becoming divorced from the natural world, and rarely taking part in unstructured free-play.





Photo by Gail M. Hoffman

TWA member Bruce Hoffman (far right) explained his commitment to *Kritters 4 Kids*: "When my son was little, we sat together four feet from a pack of javelinas, so close you could hear them breathing. You can't get that from a textbook. Brent still lives on the ranch today and is raising our grandson there." (Brent Hoffman (left); Briggs "Tarzan" Hoffman (center))

In Texas, Louv's book and other factors sparked momentum for what would, by 2009, become The Texas Partnership for Children in Nature. With TWA and TPWD at the forefront, the non-partisan coalition, comprised of 81 representatives from various fields, took a hard look at how we could reverse those trends. By fall 2010, the coalition released its State Strategic Plan, which included recommendations from six teams, with each team setting forth specific goals and objectives.

In the plan, the Education Team set as its mission to: (1) provide opportunities for every Texas child and family to engage with nature; and (2) increase understanding of Texas natural resources. Another way to phrase #2 would be to increase natural resource literacy across the state. Ultimately, the goals set forth by the Education Team resulted in the Natural Resource/Environmental Literacy Plan, which was unveiled on January 25, 2013, at a one-day Natural Resources Literacy Summit in San Antonio.

Typically, we think of "literacy" as the ability to read and write, but, according to Webster's New World Dictionary, a literate person could refer to one who is well-educated, or one who shows extensive knowledge. It follows then, that a person in Texas who is "natural resource literate" would possess knowledge of Texas' major natural resources and the knowledge, skills, and ability to analyze the issues – social and environmental – relating to them.

Many of TEA's current TEK's lend

themselves perfectly to the sorts of hands-on lessons geared toward natural resources literacy. "Kids want to get into nature, it's just that there's so much else going on now that it's hard for them to do," Hoffman said. "But, to understand the natural world, you've got to get into it, not just study it. There's stuff you just can't get from a textbook," Hoffman insisted.

Cheryl Browning agreed that kids want to get out into nature. She and her husband, Art, never have trouble filling slots in their own summer camp near Scurry. "We created Camp Wildlife in memory of our 8-year-old son, Hunter Mason Browning, who we lost 5 1/2 years ago. Each summer, we hold one-day camps for boys and girls ages 8-16. All of the activities are wildlife and habitat related," she shared.

Since October 2011, the Brownings have also participated in TWA's Learning Across New Dimensions in Science, more commonly known as the L.A.N.D.S. Program. Like *Kritters 4 Kids*, L.A.N.D.S. focuses on natural resource literacy. Koy Coffey, the TWA professional staff member who directs the L.A.N.D.S. Intensive program, explained that it's designed so that learning begins in the classroom with culminating lessons occurring in the field,

usually on private land. "We work with the teacher to custom fit the lesson plan. Our whole goal is to enhance what the teacher already has to do," Coffey said.

During visits to private land, children participate in a plethora of activities that might include a plant walk, learning about radio telemetry, learning how quail forage, and journaling about their experiences. Browning recalled watching children's faces during L.A.N.D.S. visits to their Cedar Mountain Lodge: "The thing that Art and I noticed...was when Koy has a quiet time for them to listen to what they hear. Many of the kids had not heard nature before! The buzz and excitement from all the kids telling Koy what they heard..."

Like *Kritters 4 Kids*, L.A.N.D.S. has placed much of its focus on reaching children in urban areas. "We've worked with thousands of urban kids," explained Coffey. These kids, she explained, are most in need of literacy. But as the term "nature-deficit" implies, these days fewer children from all walks are getting direct experiences in nature.

TWA member Paula Smith, who, with her husband, Ernest, hosts L.A.N.D.S. groups on their Rocksprings ranch, said,



Photo by Koy Coffey

TWA members Paula and Ernest Smith (center) hosted a L.A.N.D.S. educator workshop at their Rocksprings ranch. Paula Smith said, "About 15-20 teachers came and spent the weekend. What was interesting was that the so many of the teachers, themselves, had so little exposure to the flora and fauna here."

"Many of the kids we had here live in Brackettville, which is only about 23 miles away, but many of them had never been to the country, never had anyone talk to them about flora or fauna, even the flora or fauna of this region."





L.A.N.D.S. strives to get to the heart of “literacy” by making natural science relevant to students’ lives. The Trinity L.A.N.D.S. Program provides a powerful example. The program, a joint effort by TWA, Trinity Waters, TPWD, and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, allows students to get real-world experience as they measure, analyze, filter, and test water and evaluate impacts of use and stewardship practices upon the watershed. The take-home message speaks louder than any textbook ever could, and kids learn first-hand the importance of water in Texas and the role each individual plays in its quality and quantity. Coffey stressed, “But we couldn’t do any of it without private landowners, volunteers and community outreach.”

L.A.N.D.S., *Kritters 4 Kids*, and other like-minded groups – some formed by communities and homeowners’ associations – across the state all have the same goal: to reverse the “nature-deficit” trend and improve natural resource literacy. TPWD, which has played an important leadership role throughout the children-in-nature movement, recently made another contribution when it hired a part-time Texas Children in Nature coordinator.

“It’s not a process of advancing any one agenda,” insisted Carter Smith, Executive Director of TPWD and a member of TWA. “It’s about building science-based knowledge and experiences to help people make informed choices. With the long-term challenges our state faces, such as how to provide water for people and the environment, we can’t afford an illiterate citizenry when it comes to our natural resources.”

When *The Partnership for Texas Children in Nature* held its Natural Resources Literacy Summit to unveil the Natural Resource/Environmental Literacy Plan on January 25, 2013, former First Lady Laura Bush, gave the keynote speech. Two years ago, Mrs. Bush formed the conservation-minded non-profit, *Taking Care of Texas*, which counts former TWA President Tina Y. Buford, former TWA Vice President Dr. Neal Wilkins, TWA Director Katharine Armstrong, TWA Director Mark Bivins, and former TWA professional staff member



Photo by Kouy Coffey

“It gives us great pleasure to share this place. Especially with children who have limited access to nature. We have four endangered species – two plants and two birds. I think it’s important for kids to learn to protect our endangered species,” said TWA member Paula Smith, shown here with children journaling about what they’ve learned during a L.A.N.D.S. visit.



Photo courtesy of Coastal Bend Habitat Educational Program

Since *Kritters 4 Kids* began in 2002, it has delivered TEA’s science TEKS to children in nearly 200 schools. As of February 2013, 20 others wait to participate, but funding is needed to hire additional staff.

Tamara Trail (who played a key role in getting *The Partnership for Texas Children in Nature* off the ground), among its board members.

Those who’d ever made a simple, but profound, discovery in the outdoors as a child understood Mrs. Bush when she shared how formative and instrumental her girlhood moments of free-play in nature were and how vital it is that children continue experiencing such moments. And, when Mrs. Bush said, “Nature and the natural world are like a foreign language to many of today’s kids in Texas and around

the nation,” Hoffman’s anecdote seemed especially telling.

But, as TWA members Paula and Ernest Smith discovered when they hosted a group of educators for a L.A.N.D.S. workshop at their Rocksprings ranch, today even fewer adults seem to speak the language of nature. Paula Smith said, “What was interesting was that the teachers, themselves, had so little exposure. One young teacher was entranced with a cactus. She’d never seen one before up close and asked if she could take it home.”

