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This 800-word article was a commercial commission by L'Obra Social, an educational project supported by the cultural foundation of the Spanish bank, La Caixa. The article explores histories of outdoor education in the light of current anxieties about children's lack of contact with nature. It draws on Pollen's research into the early twentieth century woodcraft movement in order to provide critical context for new educational practices that teach children outdoor skills.

THE OTHER SCHOOL

Annebella Pollen

There's a powerful current anxiety that urban children are losing touch with nature. The generation so very well connected to the internet and social media are seen to be ever more disconnected from the benefits of the great outdoors. Whether these anxieties cluster around sedentary lifestyles and child obesity, or the loss of knowledge in a world where many urban children find it easier to identify corporate logos than names of plants and animals, many parents and educators have expressed concern that contemporary childhood needs an injection of fresh air and green space.

As a consequence, a wide range of recent endeavours have been put in place to promote outdoor opportunities for young people. These include popular cross-European educational programmes such as Forest School, which encourages children to adopt activities that use nature as a classroom, and to develop "bushcraft" skills, including making fires and woodland crafts. Other projects such as "Los Cinco Grandes" by CaixaProinfancia in Spain teach values, like environmental respect and teamwork, to children with families at risk of social exclusion through outdoor expeditions.

Academic studies have repeatedly proved the benefits for children in spending time outdoors. Interestingly, this can include urban parks, playgrounds and allotments as well as what might usually be imagined as "wilderness". In all cases, demonstrable benefits include improved mental and physical health, alongside wider positive cultural and social impacts, from increased environmental awareness to community engagement.

While these anxieties seem to have multiplied in recent years, worries about children's disconnection from nature are longstanding. In my own work, I have examined a century's worth of similar concerns, and particular attempts to correct them. In Britain, in the very earliest years of the twentieth century, fears about the physical health and moral direction of young men led to the establishment of Boy Scouts by Sir Robert Baden-Powell. Understanding of the improving qualities of collective outdoor life was informed by Baden-Powell's experiences in the army but also by heroic adventure stories and mythical ideas about primitive hardihood. These ideas came mostly from

Ernest Thompson Seton, a British-born, American artist and naturalist, whose writings deeply informed the Boy Scout movement.

For Seton, the sophisticated urban dweller could learn much from the practices of those who, he believed, lived a life closer to nature. Seton suggested that the “Red Man”, or Native American, offered an ideal to live by. Although Seton’s ideas were romanticised and based on cultural generalisations, he argued that Native American ways of life could offer a corrective for urban boys in particular, who were understood to be weak, malnourished and morally adrift. In his “Woodcraft Indians” organisation, nature provided a space where boys could develop physical hardihood through survival skills such as tracking, trailing and fire-building, and moral authority through collective decision-making in camp settings.

Seton was a socialist and a pacifist, and although his ideas were partly incorporated into Boy Scout practices, he was unhappy about their mix with military discipline. In Britain, his ideas were adapted and expanded during and shortly after the First World War by pacifist and socialist youth groups who sought to provide access to nature without Baden-Powell’s imperialist and militarist mission. “Woodcraft” groups were concerned with nature skills but also established countercultural ideologies. The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, and the Woodcraft Folk had differing belief systems and practices, but each believed that boys and girls – as well as adults - needed to live closer to nature in order to improve personal and national health and strength. Members were urban or suburban dwellers; for them, the countryside embodied all that was mystical, enduring and authentic. These were in opposition to values embodied by the city (artificiality, superficiality and sophistication).

Woodcraft groups attracted thousands of members and supporters in the interwar years, including popular writers – H. G. Wells, for example – and political heavyweights. Theirs was a highly distinctive approach to reintroducing children to the natural world. They proposed that a true immersion in woodcraft values was more than a leisure activity. It was a commitment to a complete cultural and spiritual revolution, which would result in the creation of a new utopia after urban civilisation’s inevitable collapse.

Although these groups did not succeed in founding a new world, some of their values are echoed in current endeavours uniting children and nature. The woodcraft practices of early groups informed by Seton are revived in the popularity of “bushcraft” activities in the twenty-first century. As a historian and a product of an indoor childhood myself, I understand that nature is not a panacea for all social ills, and recognise that it is sometimes idealised as a utopian location by those who live in cities. Nonetheless, I salute the valuable projects that help our children appreciate the outside world in all its forms.