

HIKING Teens to Trails reunites kids and nature



By CAREY KISH
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Teenagers from the East Grand School Outing Club on a winter camping trip. Teens to Trails hopes to establish outdoors clubs in each of Maine's 215 high schools.

Kids in the outdoors: Hiking, camping, boating, fishing, biking, chasing each other about under the summer sun. You remember those days, I'm sure. Outdoor activities are such a natural part of life, a time-honored tradition of good health and good fun. How could that ever change?

Fast forward, from the halcyon days of our youth to the fast-paced, technology-driven life of today. You and me, we spend less time outdoors than ever; our children considerably less than that. Statistics bear out the sad truth. Television, video games, the Internet; all have helped to drive kids indoors. Free time is at a premium; carefree, unstructured days have been replaced by demanding, consuming schedules of school and sports.

NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER

The issue has gotten serious enough that there's now a term for the condition – nature deficit-disorder. Kids today are losing interest in the natural world around them, their connection to the outdoors and its physical and mental benefits. And we are losing the next generation of stewards of our precious environmental resources. Factor in the alarming upward trends in obesity, mental health problems and suicide among youngsters and you've got the makings of a pandemic problem.

All hope is not lost, however, if you talk to Carol Leone of Edgecomb. Leone and her husband Bob are making a determined effort to reunite children with the beauty and bounty of nature through Teens to Trails, a nonprofit organization they founded in 2006.

"Teens to Trails is all about getting young people outdoors, providing them with some unstructured time, and allowing them to make their own personal connection with nature," said Leone.

There are so many good reasons why children should spend more time outdoors and why we adults need to focus on it, Leone says. Like increased confidence and self-awareness, encouraging a healthy and respectful lifestyle, developing non-competitive leadership skills, realizing a sense of place, learning humility, connecting to the tangible.

Leone, an 11-member working board and a host of dedicated volunteers are working to accomplish their mission in a grassroots manner. Their goal is to establish an outing club at each of Maine's 215

high schools, a program "active and enthusiastically supported by and beneficial to the community." To date there are just 35 outing clubs, so there is much work to be done.

"It's a slow process, but doable," Leone told me. "It's definitely achievable. Maine is the perfect place for a pilot project such as this."

Teens to Trails reaches out to teachers, school administrators, outdoor clubs, public agencies, businesses, park managers, experienced outdoors persons; the people and places who can help make the connections between kids and the outdoors.

"We're not about running outing club programs, but rather providing the framework to get new outing clubs and mentoring programs started," said Leone. "We want to help them get things off the ground, and to do what they already do better."

TEENS TO TRAILS CONFERENCE

The next big step forward in the effort to bring nature and kids back together is the second annual Teens to Trails Conference from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. April 5 at Windham High School.

Teens to Trails Conference April 5 at Windham High School
7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Register at www.TeensToTrails.org

"The conference is meant to create an atmosphere of energy and enthusiasm, an event where kids can celebrate the outdoors and getting outside," notes Leone.

The day will feature a series of fun, interactive workshops and exhibits; from rock climbing, sea kayaking basics and backpacking essentials to outdoor photography, backcountry cooking and orienteering, and much more.

Teens and teachers are the target audience, but the public is welcome and encouraged to participate, share and enjoy. The cost is \$10 for teens and \$20 for adults, and includes breakfast and lunch. Pre-register by March 20 and receive a free Teens to Trails T-shirt.

"There is a sense of place and wonder that comes only from a personal journey," reads a passage from the Teens to Trails Web site. "These things cannot be taught. They cannot really even be actively encouraged. We can only help create opportunities for teens to be out-of-doors. Outing clubs provide one perfect instrument for getting teens to Maine's many and varied trails."

The Leone's know a lot about personal journeys, having lost their teenage daughter Sara in an auto accident in 2005. From that tragic loss has grown the bright promise of Teens to Trails, a spirited project of hope for our future, dedicated to Sara's memory.

To become involved with Teens to Trails, find info on the upcoming conference or to make a donation of support, go to www.teenstotrails.org or call **882-6935**.

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