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## Getting Back to Nature



Photos courtesy NatureBridge

**M**any of us fondly recall our carefree childhood experiences at summer camp spending endless hours exploring and learning about the natural world. For decades, outdoor summer camp adventures have been a rite of passage for many kids, but it's a tradition that is dwindling in popularity as more and more children are whiling away their vacations sitting in front of television screens and video games.

### Why are nature-based summer camps so important?

#### Let us count the ways:

Summer camp fosters a love of nature and the outdoors, which is vital to building good environmental stewards. With our planet threatened by increased urbanization and climate change, it's important that we foster a sense of responsibility to nature among future generations so they will be inspired to care for the Earth, not only through simple activities such as recycling and composting programs but also becoming the environmental leaders of tomorrow.

Summer camp offers kids a chance to keep learning. Students are at risk of suffering learning losses during long breaks from school. Moreover, the Nation's Report Card, released in January, shows fewer than half of U.S. students are proficient in science. Yet science and environmental education are vital to the future to the Bay Area and the state of California. Having an opportunity to learn about science in an outdoor environment not only keeps children's

minds engaged, it can also positively impact learning throughout the year.

Summer camp can boost confidence because it presents new challenges and opportunities. When a child completes a hike that he may have never thought he could do, he experiences a heightened sense of accomplishment. A girl who may be shy at school can find a common bond with a campmate and forge a new friendship. An underachieving student realizes that he is fascinated by wildlife and eager to learn as much as he can thereby increasing his self esteem and knowledge of the natural world.

Nature-based summer camp instills an unexplored sense of wonder. Because it is often full of new experiences, the great outdoors opens up new worlds for kids, especially those from urban areas who have had little to no exposure to nature. For many kids, it is the only chance to see plants and animals in their natural settings.

Perhaps most importantly, summer camp is fun. It's a time when a kid is free to really be a kid, without the strict rules of a classroom. It's an opportunity for new experiences, to make new friends, and just be a kid.

**About the Author:** Ally Kushin is Director of Camp and Family Programs at NatureBridge's Headlands Institute. Coastal Camp runs in weeklong sessions from June 13 - August 15, 2011. For more information, visit: [www.coastalcamp.org](http://www.coastalcamp.org)