

# Wild Zones

'Nurturing a generation of young people who love the earth and love their own lives'

## What is a Wild Zone?

Wild Zones are ecologically rich environments that offer open-ended possibilities for self-designed play, creativity, and socializing. They differ from parks and nature reserves because they offer the opportunity to do practical and adventurous things, such as building shelters, making trails, climbing trees, damming creeks, creating sculptures from natural materials and other types of free play. They are places for people of all ages to form bonds of caring and connection with the natural world

Wild Zones are also a new form of social space where adults, children and teenagers can interact in ways that increase trust and appreciation between the generations. They can be co-created by people of diverse backgrounds in a process that evolves as children, teens and adults interact with a piece of land in ways that express their interests and aspirations. Wild Zones are a resource for mobilizing youth's and adults' sense of initiative, adventure, cooperation, and enjoyment.

Wild Zones build a web of relationships across boundaries of age, gender, ability, class and ethnicity that can significantly increase the social capital of any community.

## Elements of a *Wild Zone*

- Playing with water, mud, sand, plants and trees
- Constructing treehouses, shelters, dams, walls, sculpture and other structures using natural and recycled materials
- Time for reflection, wondering and wandering
- Skilled and playful adults to facilitate the projects

## Main Activities

- **Co-creating:** Depending on the interests of the youth and adults involved, a **Wild Zone** could include spaces for earth-based construction, imaginative and challenging pathways, social activities and solitude, community orchard, wildlife habitat, mountain bike trails, and/or an adventure course that includes built and natural features designed to stimulate physically, mentally and emotionally challenging activities.
- **Cultivating Allies:** **Wild Zones** will foster widening community involvement, building links between local agencies, connecting diverse communities, and negotiating divergent agendas and perspectives.
- **Mentorship:** Adults and older teens (14-18) will welcome the younger ones (10-13) into **Wild Zones** and mentor them as they join in with existing projects and later initiate their own projects (either to develop new areas of an existing Wild Zone or create new Wild Zones). Adults will also mentor teens and learn from them.

## Additional activities could include

- **Land-based Art** – site-specific performance, pottery, sculpture, etc.
- **Festivals/ceremonies** – development of local traditions and celebrations
- **Story/Myth** – telling and performing the stories of diverse communities as well as documenting the process of creating Wild Zones and other community-building initiatives.
- **Micro-enterprises** – workshops, mountain bike hire and repair, tool library, etc.

- **Exchange Visits** with other youth and field trips to other land-based youth projects. Connection to other young people around the world who are involved in Wild Zones and other forms of community regeneration will break down isolation, increase social skills, offer opportunities for peer education, and enhance the self-image of youth and adults.

### **Why are Wild Zones needed?**

There are six main needs that Wild Zones address:

#### **1. Child and Adolescent Health**

There are rising levels of obesity, stress, heart disease, diabetes, depression and eating disorders among children and teenagers in many countries.

#### **2. Learning**

Relentless testing and competitiveness lead many students to give up or become angry and embittered. Children labeled with 'attention deficit disorder' and 'hyperactivity' find it difficult to learn effectively in a classroom environment. Even successful students may feel their achievements have been won at the cost of their authentic desire to learn and gain skills.

#### **3. Anti-social Behavior**

There is grave concern about the levels of crime, violence, abuse of alcohol and drugs, and anti-social behavior among children and teenagers.

#### **4. Immigration**

Immigrants often do not feel welcomed into the mainstream life of the society they are entering; they can suffer from alienation, depression, lack of respect, crime and poverty.

#### **5. Civic Engagement**

The failure to give children and youth a role in their communities risks breeding apathy and ignorance about democracy and community building.

#### **6. Ecological Stewardship**

All of the ecosystems and species of the earth, including humans, continue to be threatened in numerous ways. Our children will inherit this major challenge and will be expected to care for and heal a severely damaged biosphere. But many children will reach adulthood with no experiences of being nurtured and healed by time spent playing or relaxing in natural environments.

### **How Do Wild Zones Meet These Needs?**

Wild Zones approach these problematic issues through a proactive and inclusive strategy that transforms public spaces in ways that can have profound social impact. Wild Zones use an "asset-based" approach that builds on people's strengths and interests rather than focusing on their problems.

#### **Access to open space for adventurous free play**

Extensive research shows that play is critical to the development of children's cognitive and social abilities, as well as for their physical and emotional health.

Due to the cyber revolution, urban development, risk aversion, and pressures of academic achievement, this is the first generation of children to grow up with such utter lack of opportunity or encouragement for self-directed outdoor play. There is an unprecedented rise in childhood obesity. Young people need healthy lifestyles that reduce the risk of

obesity and illness. But many children feel left out of organized games and physical education if they are not talented or interested in the competitive ethos. In addition to the health benefits of exercise and creativity, time spent in nature can offer a sense of safety, peace of mind and the ability to hear oneself think that is difficult to achieve in urban environments.

A wide range of research about the negative impacts of reduced opportunities for children's outdoor play is analyzed in Richard Louv's recent book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Young people of all ethnic groups, classes, abilities and genders need to be invited and facilitated to engage with the natural world in ways that are appealing and stimulating.

**Wild Zones will improve the health and wellbeing of children and adolescents by offering open-ended possibilities for self-designed play, creativity, and socializing in a natural environment**

### **Cooperative learning environments**

The importance of acknowledging and developing 'multiple intelligences' is well-documented, but children with diverse learning styles are penalized by educational systems that focus on standardized testing. Embodied and practical learning scarcely exists in schools. Young people need opportunities to succeed in their lives. But those with diverse learning styles are often labeled as failures or troublemakers or ADHD when, in fact, they have a great capacity for learning if their cognitive diversity is respected. Young people need to be seen in terms of their interests and passions, not just their problems and challenges. Wild Zones will encourage learning and literacy by offering an appreciation of cognitive diversity and collaborative learning, the development of practical and emotional intelligence, and pathways for stimulating children's curiosity about the world. Informal and embodied learning will give a sense of achievement to youth who are not succeeding in academic subjects.

**Wild Zones will provide a context for projects outside of school and home that enable young people to learn in situations that are unmediated by judgments, expectations, or having to account for what they are learning.**

### **Intergenerational collaboration**

In many places, intergenerational relations are mostly negative. Adults are often disparaging about young people and tend to avoid contact with them. Conversely many young people are immersed in 'youth culture' and are hostile and rejecting towards adults in general. Many adults would like to be more involved with children and teenagers, but don't know how to get involved. Not so many people want to be teachers who must control a class of twenty or more students in a classroom. But working on creative outdoor projects with a small group or an individual could be very satisfying.

**Wild Zones will nurture relationships of respect, trust and enjoyment between the generations.**

### **Initiation of adolescents**

Teenagers have so much to offer and they are given such meager opportunities for using their energy and creativity to contribute to community life and public space. Society suffers from the lack of creative input by teenagers, and teenagers certainly suffer from being seen as a social problem and not being invited to contribute their ideas, talents and energy to creating communities that work better for everyone.

Although there is often less-than-adequate play provision for younger children, there is usually even less opportunity for teenagers and pre-teens to engage in self-directed activities in a natural setting. Sports, school clubs, and skateboard parks do not address

the needs and potential of many young people. There is a serious need in many countries for programs that will appeal to children and teenagers who do not join the usual after-school activities. These are the youth who are most at risk of addiction, crime and other forms of anti-social behavior. And those who do join in existing activities are often suffering from over-scheduling and a lack of spontaneous creative play.

Adolescents have forever sought out risk, challenge, and innovative ways of being tested. There are complex challenges in steering young humans through the perilous teenage years of accelerated brain development, hormonal changes, social maturation, and desperate yearning for independence. Recognizing the dangers as well as the opportunities of the teenage years, many cultures have traditionally created 'rites of passage' especially designed to give twelve and thirteen-year olds some big challenges that require them to be strong, brave and intelligent – but also give them intensive contact with adults who become mentors and models while preparing the teens mentally, physically and emotionally to face these challenges successfully.

**Wild Zones will provide a context for initiatory experiences that facilitate young people in their challenging transition from childhood through adolescence to responsible adulthood.**

#### **Living laboratory of conflict resolution**

Every collaborative endeavor involves differences of opinion – even among likeminded and well-meaning individuals. There will inevitably be conflicting interests and ideas within any Wild Zone, and negotiating and mediating these differences peacefully will involve learning for everyone. Adults have a crucially important role in passing on some of the accumulated wisdom and techniques that have proven useful in defusing potentially violent and hateful reactions to conflicts of interest. Equally, there are young people who have remarkable skills of mediation and negotiation whose talents need to be recognized and supported.

**Wild Zones will make a valuable contribution to a culture of peace.**

#### **Community involvement**

There is widespread ignorance about community building strategies among all age groups. Even people who are aware of the problems and would like to make a difference don't know how to use their talents and goodwill to have an impact on the problems they care about. As they co-create Wild Zones as places of community enjoyment, people of all ages can experience civic engagement as an enjoyable and challenging activity that involves working and playing with interesting people, taking risks, learning things they want to learn, and doing things they never imagined.

**Wild Zones will give young people and adults the opportunity to make a positive contribution to their communities**

#### **Ecological care and connection**

Today's children are expected to develop the skills and sustain the motivation to care for the life systems that support us. They grow up learning about the Earth as a set of nearly intractable problems, but they have little first-hand experience of the earth's nurturance and delights.

This concern is attracting the attention of environmentalists who recognize that the younger generations lack of free play in the natural world can severely compromise their passion and dedication as environmental stewards – just when crucial issues such as climate change require unprecedented levels of creative and steadfast commitment.

**Wild Zones will offer a sense of connection to the natural world that facilitates an increased a sense of belonging and an ethic of care.**

## **Where will Wild Zones be located?**

Wild Zones will be located in and around urban areas where teens and children can easily access them.

- Within existing parkland or designated open spaces, green belts, etc.
- On marginal or derelict land
- On military land that has been converted to civilian use
- On land belonging to utility companies (electric, gas, water)
- On private land
- At environmental education centers
- At day-camps, summer camps and other campgrounds
- On land belonging to schools, colleges, civic or religious institutions
- As part of an open space requirement for new residential or commercial development

## **How will Wild Zones be designed?**

Rather than creating a 'master plan', the development of each Wild Zone will emerge from the involvement of successive waves of youth and adults. Everyone can come up with ideas for bringing new areas into use according to their particular interests, skills and the availability of materials, mentorship, training, etc. At every stage the process will include a variety of ways for people of diverse interests and backgrounds to meet and learn from each other.

## **How can we start creating Wild Zones?**

There are few publicly-accessible Wild Zones in developed countries: although there is open space, children and adults are usually not welcome to build their own structures, trails or art projects. However, many aspects of Wild Zones could occur in existing natural areas such as parks, forests or any other area large enough to provide a sense of exploration and fun. They could also be created on marginal or derelict land. For example:

**At a Day Camp or Environmental Education Center.** Just as there is a time slot for swimming or horseback riding or biology lessons, there could be a session called 'Wild Zones' in which young people and adults (camp counselors, environmental education staff, artists or other adult volunteers) go into the woods and play around making and building stuff.

**An After-School Program.** Staff and community volunteers could take kids who sign up for 'Wild Zones' to a local park or woodland where there is permission to do Wild Zone activities.

**A Weekly/Monthly Program for Families.** Just as there are regular trail-building or bird-watching events, parents and children could play and build and mess around together in a Wild Zone that has been designated in a regional park or forest or recreation area.

**A Recreation Area with Staff and Infrastructure.** A Wild Zone could be established in an enclosed area on public or private land, with hours of admission, a tool shed, staff, artisans to assist with projects, and larger, longer-term organized projects (such as mountain bike trails, adventure course, etc.).

**A Community-wide Process to Create a New Wild Zone.** Neighbors, artists, businesses, local government officials, parents, teenagers, teachers, youth programs, religious groups and a wide range of others may join together to advocate for a Wild Zone to be created in their community – either as part of an existing open space or by

're-wilding' marginal or derelict land by planting and nurturing a wide range of trees, shrubs, grasses and flowers which would mature into a diverse eco-system where people could play and build and create.

## **Who is involved?**

### **About the Co-founders**

**David Hawkins** has worked for over 20 years as a counselor, teacher and advocate for young people in schools, colleges, adventure playgrounds, arts centers, their homes, and the street. After teaching liberal studies at Exeter College to factory workers on day release, he worked for 10 years for the Inner London Education Authority with boys who had been suspended from school for violent or racist behavior. He was also a founder of a community newspaper that was primarily concerned with the struggle of working class communities in the inner city to protect themselves against inappropriate redevelopment; it was published for over 20 years. From 1996-2000 he was Project Manager of The Edible Schoolyard at Martin Luther King Middle School, a multi-racial school in Berkeley, California. He worked with nine hundred 11-13 year olds to transform a trashed out vacant lot into a beautiful and productive garden that has been widely reported in the media. He has spoken about children's issues at conferences, and to businesses and NGO's the U.S. and England. He is the father of three grown sons.

**Karen Payne** has worked as a consultant, writer, filmmaker and workshop leader for over 25 years, focusing on issues of social and environmental justice, community development, anti-racism, violence prevention and social change philanthropy. As Program Director of the American Community Gardening Association (1996-2000), she designed and implemented ACGA's program 'From the Roots Up', which provided mentoring, leadership development, community organizing and anti-racism training in low-income neighborhoods across the U.S. Karen was the director and producer of *Turning of the Tide*, a one-hour documentary that tells the story of admirals, generals and scientists involved in nuclear defense strategy, who had a crisis of conscience and became anti-nuclear strategists (Channel Four, 1988). She was also production manager and consultant for several other documentaries for Channel Four TV. Her book, *Between Ourselves: Letters between Mothers and Daughters 1750-1982*, gives a history of women's rights issues through the letters of famous and unknown women. It was a bestseller and has been in print for over 20 years (Houghton Mifflin/Michael Joseph, 1983; Picador, 1884; Virago, 1995).

In 2000, Karen and David co-founded Transforming Violence, an initiative to build social intelligence and offer opportunities for people to participate in creative strategies for preventing, stopping and healing violence. [www.transformingviolence.org](http://www.transformingviolence.org).

### **Contact Us**

*For more information about Wild Zones, contact Karen Payne and David Hawkins*

[dhawkins@wild-zone.net](mailto:dhawkins@wild-zone.net)

[kpayne@transformingviolence.org](mailto:kpayne@transformingviolence.org)

[www.wild-zone.net](http://www.wild-zone.net)