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From Our Readers: My View

Appreciation of nature born at Chestnut Ridge

Lee Swaydis of Blasdell wants more good stewards of the planet.



The concept that you “don’t know what you have until it’s gone,” has really stabbed at my conscience the past few weeks.

I am a lifelong Western New Yorker who is a month away from departing for my first year of college in Meadville, Pa. As expected, it was difficult to bid farewell to many of my teachers and classmates on the last day of school. The future goodbye to my family this August should prove to be even more heartfelt. One separation pain I did not foresee, though, is from the forgotten places of my childhood. In short, I will miss Chestnut Ridge.

Indeed, the park on the outskirts of Orchard Park is very dear to me. When I was a toddler, my mother would take me to “the Ridge” to relieve my robust hyperactivity. We would roll down the sled hill, play on the trails or even descend the famous hundred steps to the creek. It was a carefree time of fresh air and natural beauty.

Chestnut Ridge continued to be a large part of my life in high school as well. When I joined the cross country team, I unknowingly assured myself countless hours of jogging the hilly trails of my cherished park. Those four years allowed me to become especially intimate with the wilderness of Chestnut Ridge. I bounded through its forest, soaked in its cool streams and scaled its steep ravines. Every time I did so, a renewed sense of wonder struck me, driving me to grow ever more appreciative of nature’s magnificence.

Literature concerning past, present and future environmental depletion as well as America’s disconnection with the earth has been infiltrating the mainstream quite frequently of late. One such book, authored by David Orr of Oberlin College, advocates ecological education as the key to a healthier environment. In his book, “Earth in Mind,” he argues that the bond between humans and nature is one primarily of touch, sight, sound and smell, that our senses are what gives us our compassion for nature and that this compassion could carry us to a sustainable future.

As Stephen Gould phrased it, “We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well, for we will not fight to save what we do not love.” If we wish to create a society that nurtures the environment, we must begin to reintroduce nature to ourselves and our progeny. Instill greater affection for the natural world in the hearts of children, and they will mature to become stewards of the earth as opposed to degraders of it.

Our society’s bio-deficiency wasn’t apparent to me until Bill Hudson, the director of the Buffalo Audubon Society, led my environmental science class on a tour of Beaver Meadows nature preserve. His knowledge of the flora and fauna in the area was so vast that I was quickly embarrassed by my naivete. We ventured 10 meters and Hudson nonchalantly named every plant in sight along with its medical uses, edibility and folklore. It was humbling to realize just how little I knew about my own backyard.

Understandably, the more one knows about a subject, the more one will care for it. I know a great deal about “the Ridge” and thus consider it extremely precious. This correlation has never been as important as it is today. In the midst of global climate change, deforestation, oil spills and mass extinction, the time has come to take responsibility for “The Creation” that is earth. I hope that more will join me in the quest to enhance man’s comprehension of our life-giving planet and ultimately save it from ecological collapse.