VIEWPOINT

What happened to a walk in the woods?

Outdoor Retailer show organiser Andy Tompkins likes you to spend some time getting to know Utah. He is a mountain biker himself and likes to cycle around Moab.

Moab is an interesting place. Sitting in a café in the Main Street, sipping your 'smoothie', you watch a kaleidoscope of all America travelling by and you are among a mass of people heading off to cycle, rock climb, white water raft, or just walk up on the trails in the Arches National Park. It is not hard to be taken by the allure of the outdoors and start to participate in some activity or other.

If you are relaxing a little longer you might pick up a free copy (one free copy per reader, please) of the Canyon Country Zephyr, a small local paper published by a man called Jim Stiles, which, he likes to tell you, has "been clinging hopelessly to the past since 1989". Stiles writes interesting editorials and his August 2005 was no exception. Entitled "The End of Random Recreation", he talks about his childhood in Louisville, Kentucky, and tells us of the wheat field behind the house, beyond which was a forest, and a playground simply called "The Woods". It was here that he and his friends invented their childhoods, "one gloriously unscheduled day at a time".

As he grew up, walking in the countryside was the norm and required no more than an army surplus canteen (a portable water flask) and a pair of stout shoes. He writes, "I recently stopped at a sporting goods store, looking for a canteen; the young sales clerk looked at me blankly.

'You know,' I said. 'A canteen. A water bottle.'

'Oh,' he replied. 'You mean a portable hydration system.'

"How did this happen? Why did America's population suddenly seem to need organisational adventure in the first place?

"Going back 10 or 15 years, to the plethora of guide books that flooded the recreation market and the introduction of eco-tourism, I had been puzzled by the need of so many adults to be told how to have fun. Or how to have a meaningful experience. When I first looked at the commercial canyoneering web site, I noticed that the posted photographs of every tour and its paid participants revealed mostly healthy, young men and women who should have been able to walk the mile-and-a-half required without adult supervision. And then it occurred to me—these people had never done anything without adult supervision. They had no idea how to entertain themselves.

"I thought about my niece and nephews who, even 15 years ago, weren't allowed to go out and play in the neighbourhood because the world was apparently a different, more dangerous place to raise children."

Mr Stiles makes a point that resonates almost everywhere in the modern world, and he has found someone who has a neat name for it. A new book by Richard Louv called, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" gives credibility to the notion that kids no longer have any connection to nature – or to independent thought for that matter.

What Mr Stiles did not know was that those participants at the most recent OR who were fortunate enough to attend the Outdoor Industry Association breakfast were able to hear Richard Louv describe these serious issues first hand.

44 hours a week plugged in

Some of his comments were quite devastating. "For the first time our children have stopped going out to play. Instead they spend 44 hours per week plugged into some sort of electronic medium." He pointed out that in just two decades unstructured outdoor activity in the USA has started to disappear, even in the countryside. The major reason for this he gave as fear for their safety. "Stranger danger" was Louv's definition.

The unrelenting coverage of a few horrific events was a part of the creation of this fear, although in fact the number of abductions has gone down. "CNN, Fox are conditioning us to live in fear; that there is a child abductor on every corner."

Allied to this, children have now started to prefer to be in the home since "that is where all the electrical outlets are". The problem comes down to a sense of balance. Yet recent research at the University of Illinois has indicated that attention deficit disorder is reduced if children have more contact with nature. Children must bond with nature when they are little.

Lots of studies, he asserted, show that, since biologically we are still hunters and gatherers, we need contact with nature. In Scandinavia children have been shown to play more creatively and collaboratively if in a natural playground as opposed to a paved one. On the other hand, in the US most school boards make blind decisions: "we throw computers at the classroom while we take away nature. Signs on the playground say 'no running'."

Louv hit home with comments on the 'criminalisation of national play'. He pointed to new rules, environmental dangers, and private housing estates with rules on house colour, the banning of tree houses or forts and outlawing chalk drawing on the pavement. The meta-message our children are getting is severe.

1. Nature is in the past
2. The future is in computers
3. The bogeyman is in the woods

This was not a situation totally without hope but a huge change is clearly needed. From the OIA youth outreach programme, through to new housing developments, hard work is needed. New urbanisation schemes need to bring nature into the equation with such elements as nature trails along which children can walk to school.

"Most of all," said Louv, "we need odd bedfellows – the hunters and the fishers, the environmental movement, the housing developers, the faith-based environmentalists, the birdwatchers – to get together. We need to get these people out of their silos and thinking about how to get nature back into the everyday life of our children."