

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

RECREATION ACTIVITIES WITHIN PUBLIC DRINKING WATER SOURCE AREAS

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 21 APRIL 2010**

SESSION ONE

Members

Hon Max Trenorden (Chairman)
Hon Jon Ford (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Ken Baston
Hon Jim Chown
Hon Ed Dermer

Hearing commenced at 9.50 am

LOUV, MR RICHARD,
Author and Chair of Children & Nature Network,
sworn and examined:

ALEXANDER, MR RONALD
Director General, Department of Sport and Recreation,
sworn and examined:

PETERSON, MS YVETTE
Senior Policy Officer, Department of Sport and Recreation,
sworn and examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Welcome, Mr Louv, Mr Alexander and Ms Peterson. There are some formalities that we need to go through. We first need to go through the process of asking you to take either the oath or the affirmation.

[Witnesses took the oath.]

The CHAIRMAN: Have you received and read the document entitled “Information for Witnesses”?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you understood that document?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: These proceedings are being recorded by Hansard. A transcript of the evidence will be provided to you. To assist the committee, if you are quoting from any documents or any books, or whatever, would you please give the title at the time so that Hansard can source that record. Just be aware of the microphones if you would not mind. They do not tend to cause too many problems. I need to remind you that the transcript will be on the public record. If for some reason you wish to make a confidential statement during today’s proceedings, you should request that the evidence be taken in closed session. If the committee grants your request, any public or media in attendance will be excluded from the hearing. Until such time as the transcript of your public evidence is finalised, it should not be made public. I advise you that publication and disclosure of the uncorrected transcript of evidence may constitute a contempt of Parliament and may mean that the material published or disclosed is not subject to parliamentary privilege. I do not think we need to worry too much about that in today’s hearings. Thank you for attending. We are at the end of an inquiry that was initiated by some ministers of the crown to look at the use of public water, basically, and the management of some dams. No doubt you have had a briefing about that. What we would like to do as a committee is give you an opportunity to address us. We have some notes about your background and the areas that you are interested in. After that process, we have some questions that we will ask you. The floor is yours.

Mr Alexander: I want to introduce Richard, who is an internationally acclaimed teacher as well as having a particular interest in nature, family and the community. You might have read something about nature deficit disorder. Richard recently has been to the White House to talk to the national policy council, as well as to address a congressional hearing. Richard may elaborate on a policy that the United States is implementing called “No Child Left Inside”. Richard has appeared numerous

times recently on national television throughout America and has also been awarded the number one conservation award in America, the Audubon Medal. That has been awarded to people in the past like Rachel Carson and Jimmy Carter. Richard says he has a lot in common with Robert Redford, who has also won the award. So he is very interested in developing the Children & Nature Network. We are very pleased to welcome Richard to Western Australia.

The CHAIRMAN: We are looking forward to hearing your perspective. We will be informal, Richard, so just address us on your expertise and raise the issues that you think we should hear.

Mr Louv: Okay. I will speak briefly, because I enjoy the exchange more than I do hearing my own voice. First, I am really honoured to be here. This Nature Play WA that has been launched here is an impressive campaign, and we hope to learn as much as we share by being in Australia. I have been in Melbourne, in Brisbane and in Bendigo in the last week and a half. In Melbourne, I was asked to keynote the Healthy Parks, Healthy People conference, which was attended by over 1 000 people from 35 nations. There is intense interest both in Australia and worldwide in the relationship between children and nature and how that relationship is changing. It seems to be changing faster in the English-speaking countries, but it is changing everywhere. That is largely because human beings are moving into cities. Australia as a highly urbanised country already has experienced this. In the United States, of course, where I am from I think some of the trends of the disconnection between children and nature are worse than they are here. But you are not far behind us. Some of the mistakes that we made could be improved on here. You have some advantages over us that Ron and I have discussed this morning in building that relationship and not letting that disconnection continue.

Basically the problem is that in the last two to three decades there has been a major, major shift in the relationship between children and nature in which children are increasingly disconnected from direct experience of nature. They can tell you anything about the Amazon rainforest, because they have learned that in class, or on television, but largely children increasingly cannot tell you about the life in their own backyard and the life in their own neighbourhood and therefore in their own bioregion. They do not have very much hands-on experience in nature—certainly not the experience that most of us had when we were kids. My experience growing up outside of Kansas City, Missouri, is I could go from my yard through a hedge and into the cornfield where my underground fort was, and then on into the woods, which seemed to go on forever. Those were my woods. I owned them. They are in my heart today; they were in my heart then. I still go to those woods sometimes, in my heart. They are a very special place. I find something there that I do not find anywhere else. Many of us, if we are old enough, had that kind of experience in nature when we were kids. People who care about the environment—conservationists, environmentalists—the studies show almost to a person that they had a transcendent experience with nature. So one of the questions, in addition to will future generations of human beings have that place to go to, is: who will be the stewards of the earth? We will always have conservationists and environmentalists, but if we are not careful they will carry that relationship with nature in their briefcase and not in their heart; and that is a very different relationship. At the same time, we have statistics showing this extreme break. This is not an exercise in nostalgia, by the way. For all of human history and prehistory, human beings went outside in their developing years and spent that time either working or playing in nature. That has now changed within the last two or three decades, because of electronics, partly, and also because of the over-structuring of children's lives, and because of fear—primarily stranger danger fear—which largely has been created by my profession. I have been a journalist for a long time. That has created a change in two or three decades that is unprecedented in human experience. The nature writer Bill McKibben in the United States talks about this as being one of the greatest experiments in history.

Now the good news is that there are two parts to that. One is that at the very time that we are learning about that disconnection, there is a body of evidence—some of it has been done in Australia—that shows just how important a nature experience is for children's health and wellbeing

and their ability to learn. In Australia, there have been studies relating the increase in myopia or nearsightedness to the fact that kids are spending too much time indoors. The great increase in child obesity in the United States and also in Australia is related to the fact that kids are growing up with a very sedentary lifestyle. It is also diet. But it is also what they do during their days. The greatest increase in child obesity in our history has occurred during the same two decades as the greatest increase in organised sports in our history for children. That is not to say soccer is not good—it is—but it is not doing the trick, because our kids are spending less and less time just on that daily use of energy that we remember.

The University of Illinois made the finding that the symptoms of attention deficit disorder get much better very quickly with just a little bit of contact with nature. That is the case even for kids as young as five years old. That raises the question: could the huge increase in the number of kids that have been placed on Ritalin and other stimulants—in the United States in some of our schools, 30 per cent of the boys are on Ritalin to control them—have something to do with the fact that we have taken nature away from them in the first place and so radically changed their childhood? There is a lot of other evidence on the ability to learn. Kids who learn in an outdoor classroom tend to do about 26 per cent better on science testing than kids in the traditional classroom. It goes on and on. But this evidence is emerging, finally, about how everything else affects child development, except the natural world, until recently. The other part of the good news is that there is a movement building in the United States, and in Australia and Canada, and in England, to recognise the health benefits and the cognitive benefits of nature to children, and that things are beginning to change. We can talk about that more in the discussion period, but this is happening. What you are doing here in Western Australia is part of that.

I know that your focus is on water. I come from San Diego, where there is not very much water. It is similar to here in many ways. We have recreational issues, just as you do here. We have reservoirs and lakes where there is that tension between users and about how that water is used and whether people should be on it or not. We face the same kind of issues. I am certainly not here to tell you that we do a better job, but we have our issues also. But within the context of this connection between children and nature, and the extraordinarily important health, learning, mental health and physical health issues associated with that, having access to water is part of a larger right that I think children and the rest of us have to direct experiences in the natural world. We have a right to anything that is fundamental to our humanity. The research has emerged, and some of the theory that has emerged, really suggests that this experience, particularly early in life, of a direct connection with nature is fundamental to us as a species.

[10.05 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Can you talk about “Feet From the Door”. Some of the staff have looked at some of the things you have been involved in. There is a program in the UK called “Feet From the Door”. Can you talk about the concept of nature deficit disorder and those sorts of programs. You have already indicated that organised activity does not necessarily provide the outcome that people expect.

Mr Louv: I think the studies in the UK and elsewhere have shown how far the distance that kids can go from their homes has radically decreased from our grandparents’ time, when you rode your bike six miles to a lake, to today, when it is basically the front step for many kids. There are a lot of reasons for that that are understandable, but there is a price to be paid for that. I am not saying there is no risk out there from bad people. There is risk from nature that is part of its attraction. There is risk from going swimming—somebody might drown. But there is also I think a bigger risk of kids not learning how to swim. In San Diego, where I am from, an inner-city study showed that 90 per cent of the kids in the inner city of San Diego do not know how to swim. Ninety-five per cent have never been in a boat, 34 per cent of them have never been to the ocean and it is less than 20 minutes

away. This is fairly typical. In Colorado, you find that about the Rockies that are right outside the window.

Nature deficit disorder is a phrase that I coined for my book *Last Child in the Woods*. At first I coined it as a kind of tongue-in-cheek phrase. It was in the book; the publisher suggested I put it on the cover and I fought them, which shows you what I know about marketing. Once it was on the cover and became a more fleshed out idea, it caught on. Right before the book came out in 1995, I did a Google search and there was no mention at all of any nature deficit disorder. Within a few weeks of the *New York Times* running a full page article, there were 15 000 mentions. Today it is off the charts. It has entered the language. The movie, *Avatar*—a few weeks ago James Cameron did some interviews where he explained the reason for the message of that movie was about “nature deficit disorder”. It has entered the language but I am very careful to say that basically the idea is that this is not a known medical diagnosis. Maybe it should be, but it is not now. It is a shorthand way of identifying something that many of us have had in the back of our minds for a long time. We look around—where are the kids in the parks; where are the kids out there? It has caught on because of that. It has identified something people already knew was there.

The CHAIRMAN: What about the term here, “house arrest”. I can understand where it comes from but is there some documentation or some debate about that?

Mr Louv: Yes, “the virtual house arrest”. That is a phrase I use to describe the fact that kids are not going outside very much; they are spending more and more time playing video games, are on the Internet, text messaging and all of that. I am not against technology—I love my internet phone—but things have gotten out of balance. Again, Australia may be better than the US at this point, but because of a number of factors, including electronics, urban design etc, kids are spending more and more time indoors and we try to protect them. As parents we are scared to death of stranger danger. When you look at the number of stranger abductions in the United States at least, they have been going down for 20 to 30 years but our fear has been going up. That has a lot to do with the news and entertainment media. As a result, kids are being raised under what I call “protective house arrest”. That also has a huge risk, a risk to their psychological health, their physical health; their sense of connection to community. Believe it or not, you have to go outside and know the community in order to be a good citizen. It is a risk ultimately, I believe, to democracy.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you looked yourself at this question—you talked a little bit about it, but after all, we have been going for only a few minutes—of what structures that keep children in a house, what planning keeps them out of mother nature? You have a large slice of rural farming members here, I might add, so you do not have to convince us that people think that milk comes from fridges and those sorts of arguments. I would love to read some of your stuff so I will at some stage. Can you talk about those matters? Are you aware of some other people who examine those sorts of issues?

Mr Louv: Actually, there is a really good report that came out of Deakin University, the “Healthy Parks Healthy People” report, which was updated in 2008. I understand they are working on a new update. It is a really good summary of the research that has been done. Mardie Townsend at Deakin University helped pull that together. I really recommend that. It is a better university report on this research than anything that has come out of the US.

Hon JIM CHOWN: Richard, you mentioned there is a conflict—there obviously is—in allowing waterways that are used for potable drinking sources to be accessible to people. You understand the issues there. How is it being addressed in the US regarding what you are espousing here?

[10.10 am]

Mr Louv: It is different in different areas of the US. San Diego is a pretty good example, which is where I am from, because we have a lot of big reservoirs and big lakes—in fact, some of the best bass fishing in United States is in my County of San Diego in Southern California. All of that is

very valuable water because we are legally a desert in San Diego, and so water is brought in from the Colorado River, long distance, and there is a long history of that. So these reservoirs are very precious for many reasons. They have worked out a way in San Diego, and other parts of the world have done this too, where they share that water. There are regulations; for instance, I can go fishing on a lake 10 blocks from my house, but I cannot get in the water. I can get in the water if I have neoprene waders on. I can get in my float tube and fish from there, but I have to have neoprene waders on. There is more concern actually in some of these lakes about the houses surrounding the lakes in terms of nitrates and fertilisers et cetera that run off into the water than there is about people being directly related to the water.

Hon JIM CHOWN: This inquiry is about people entering the water or accessing the water.

Mr Louv: Yes. There is conflict sometimes between how we want to use the water for recreation. There was one demand made by a private helicopter tour company. They wanted to land their helicopters on lakes. So you get from that kind of demand from fishermen and from other folks. But they have worked it out pretty well. For certain days on the lake you can only fish and on other days you have boating, which makes more noise et cetera. They do have pretty strict regulations on what people can do in terms of body contact with water. They really control that.

Hon JIM CHOWN: So there is general community acceptance in regard to people recreating on their drinking water.

Mr Louv: Yes, and there is not only the community itself —

Hon JIM CHOWN: There is no adverse reaction.

Mr Louv: There is community expectation, too. I mentioned that there is a lake near where I live, 10 blocks from my house. Traditionally it has really drawn people who walk around the lake, and there is a pathway right along the water. People have been using that for health for a long time, and their health gets better when they use it because it is five miles around. After 9/11 the water department decided that they would block off the dam so that you could not walk all the way around it. It really cut down on the number of people walking, which of course has an impact on public health. People objected to that, and so they did reopen the dam, but they put a barbed wire fence along the dam to protect it from terrorists, when earthen dams basically cannot be destroyed by anything that somebody would put there. Anybody can walk around those fences to get to the dam, so it was more of a political, symbolic gesture than it was real, and it costs a lot of money to do that, but at least we are getting a walk around the lake again.

Hon JIM CHOWN: Richard, earlier in your evidence you mentioned the fact that you believe that access to water for children is a significant part of their development. Would you differentiate between water that was landlocked as opposed to, say, the ocean, because in this state we have virtually a pristine oceanfront compared with the rest of the world? Do you believe there is a difference between the two, because most of our potable water sources here, of course, are landlocked in reservoirs et cetera?

Mr Louv: That is the same in San Diego—in fact, you have more desalination going on here than we do.

Hon JIM CHOWN: I am asking you which waterway would be best accessible, in your opinion, for the development of children?

Mr Louv: They are both important and they both have restrictions on them. For instance, full body contact in fresh water is not allowed. In the ocean there is more and more talk about marine sanctuaries, so that you restrict fishing because the fisheries are so threatened. But for kids, particularly for children getting their hands wet and feet dirty, it has to happen everywhere.

Hon JIM CHOWN: As opposed to, say, a swimming pool situation?

Mr Louv: Yes.

Hon JIM CHOWN: I am trying to tie your nature theme into water, as you said earlier.

Mr Louv: Water is elemental obviously to the nature experience. It would be good if we had more public swimming pools where kids could learn how to swim, but we do not have those either, and in fact they do not learn how to swim in the lakes either, so it may be a non-issue about swimming. But the ability to be with species other than our own, which tends to happen more around water, and the ability to look into where we came from, which is what we do when we look into water —

The CHAIRMAN: It is not just about water; it is also about forests, about hills, about granite —

Mr Louv: That is right, the watershed, yes. In San Diego a good example of this is that we have urban canyons in San Diego. That is all part of the same watershed. They are discontinuous because of development et cetera. There is a program in San Diego called Aquatic Adventures that takes kids to the ocean to learn science and to get a connection with nature. Increasingly they are taking those same kids into the canyons of San Diego where the water comes from, and they learn about the watershed; they learn where water comes from and that their drinking water does not come out of space. They learn about the importance of protecting the watershed, caring for it and not trashing it. So all these things are connected.

Hon ED DERMER: I am very interested to hear what you have got to say. I am reminded of growing up, mainly through the 1960s, and very much enjoying playing with turtles and floating boats made out of egg cartons on the local lake. That was a source of tension between me and my mother, who thought I was going to drown, and all sorts of tension arose. So I do not think it is new in that sense. I would hope that within the metropolitan area, where many children reside, including the ones that I represent, there is access to some water bodies without needing to access the water bodies that we use for drinking water.

Mr Louv: I do not think it is a black-and-white issue, is it? It is similar to the protection of endangered species. There is a tendency amongst some to fence off anything that is considered a wild in order to protect endangered species, even when in some of those areas there are not that many endangered species but there are other species. The problem with that approach if it is used everywhere is that new generations of children never have a sense of awe and wonder in those places in nature, and you are going to lose a constituency for conservation in the future if they do not have that direct experience. So there is a price to be paid there. That does not mean that some places should not be cordoned off for particularly delicate endangered species. But it is not black and white. The same is true with the need for water. Some reservoirs may be the kind of place that should be off-limits to human experience. A lot of those places might be available to human recreation or experience in varying degrees. An example would be the lake near my house, where I cannot get in the water full-bodied, and they have the same concerns about sanitation et cetera that you have here, but I can fish there. It is true that while human beings have an effect on water bodies, so do deer and so do other wild animals, and so do the houses surrounded that water body in terms of nitrates from fertilisers et cetera.

[10.20 am]

Hon ED DERMER: I think you make a very interesting point about the wildlife. Part of the pleasure that I remember as a child was feeding bread to ducks, which is now frowned upon, and feeding bits of meat to induce the turtles to make an appearance. Whether that would be seen as good for the turtles or not, I do not know. But it would seem that it would be possible to provide that type of water experience to children in a way that did not need to involve the water reserves that we are requiring for our drinking water.

Mr Louv: Again it would depend on what you are defining as which of those reserves would be off limits. I think there are gradations of experience. Again, I am not saying that San Diego is doing a better job, because we have got our own problems, but there is a gradation of exposure. Some of the reservoirs in San Diego are off limits. One of the best fishing in the reservoirs in San Diego just

came back online about 20 years ago after nobody could go there for 30 years. I believe the bass fishing was great there when they reopened it. Right now there is a lake that has been open forever that they just closed because they are going to build a bigger dam for more water, and that is going to be closed for the next 12 years. However, other lakes are opened up now that were not open a few years ago. So, I think you can provide a mix of experiences, even with that kind of site.

Hon ED DERMER: I am interested in your comments on outdoor classrooms. I presume you do not mean that a child would be educated entirely in an outdoor classroom, but I am interested to find out more about what you mean.

Mr Louv: I am not advocating this but believe it not in Germany and in a few other countries now there are what are called forest schools, but some of them have no buildings where they just educate kids. They are not operating many of those. For the most part kids in the United States not allowed out of the school very much. In fact 40 per cent of school districts in the United States have either cut or eliminated recess, which is insane because we know that physical education improves grades. But there is more and more interest in, for instance, nature-centred preschools. That does not mean they are out in nature all the time; that means that they take them out part of the day. In Norway they have what is called all-weather schools, and the kids in those schools generally almost every day go outside for an hour or so, no matter what the weather. The kids in those schools have fewer colds and flu than the kids in the normal school where they stay inside all day. It has a lot to do with sedentary lifestyle et cetera in the United States. One study showed that 89 per cent of the time that kids were in preschool they were in sedentary activities. Even when they went outside, I think it was 56 per cent of the time they were in sedentary activities. That has something to do with child obesity. And again it is always the trade-off, it is always an issue of comparative risk. Yes, there is a risk outdoors et cetera, but paediatricians are now saying that this generation of children may be the first to have a lower life expectancy than their own parents because of child obesity.

Hon ED DERMER: It arises from time to time, that particular suggestion. I think that there is a very real dilemma in terms of activity versus safety, and I picked up your message that you believe that a child's own explorations are probably more effective in terms of the objectives that you have in mind than an organised outdoor activity. But I imagine that the organised outdoor activity would be better than no such outdoor activity at all.

Mr Louv: Yes.

Hon ED DERMER: And the organised outdoor activity does provide some comfort for parents who might be concerned about safety.

Mr Louv: Yes, and let me address that because it is a very important point, which is I am not pretending that we are going to go back to the 1950s any time soon. My parents said, "Go outside; don't come back in until the street lights come on." That may have something to do with why the baby boom happened! So I am not pretending that that time is going to come back, and it is primarily because of the fear that parents feel. What can happen, though, is that ironically in order to give more kids some semblance of unorganised experience in nature, we are probably going to have to organise a lot of it. We can do that with a sense of humour and try to learn to stand back and let them dig that hole. I am not talking about teachers or parents hovering over kids in the woods with nature flashcards. We have to learn and come up with new mechanisms to allow kids to have some of what we had when we were kids, and it will not be the same for many of these kids as it was when we were children.

Hon ED DERMER: So you would envisage perhaps organising without it being obviously organised.

Mr Louv: Yes.

Hon ED DERMER: Perhaps the greatest importance would be achieving supervision without it being obvious that supervision was occurring.

Mr Louv: I think that is true. One of the things that we are encouraging in the US, and I understand you have something like that here, is family nature clubs. A father and second grade teacher a couple of years ago emailed me and said that he and his wife had read *Last Child in the Woods* and some other things, they got inspired, they started getting their whole family out on the weekends and going on hikes, fishing, going to the park et cetera. One day the five-year-old tugs on his father's pants and says, "Dad, how come we're the only family having this much fun?" So he started inviting other families and today he has over 400 families on his email list. They formed essentially a club to have what amounts to be nature family play days, and there are now lots of those clubs springing up all over the United States. One of them has over 500 families as members. What is neat about that is that it deals with the fear issue, because there is perceived safety in numbers. Some of them actually do stream reclamation; they go on hikes and do lots of gardening et cetera. But also any kind of family can do it. This is great for single parent families. Any kind of neighbourhood, any kind of economic group can do it, and what is really great to my mind is you do not have to wait for funding; you can do it right now, you can do it yourself.

Hon ED DERMER: It would seem that one way of achieving subtle supervision is for the parents to actually start to think like the children again and involve themselves in the activities along with the children.

Mr Louv: Yes, and in fact that is a theme and much of the nature centres have started to learn this, that they have got to pay as much attention on the young parents in particular as they do on the kids; because the truth is that a new generation of parents is coming along, many of whom did not have much experience in nature because they are of that first teenager generation. So even when they know about all this great stuff that nature does for their child's development and want it, they do not have a clue where to start. So that is one of the reasons why these new forms of organising unorganised activity in nature are important. It is just as important, as you say, to the parents as it is for the kids to their help and wellbeing too; because this is not a bitter pill. The minute a good adult takes a child into nature, they receive all of the same stress reduction that their kid does; they receive probably a longer attention span; they receive the physical exercise, which is important; and they experience a kind of revived sense of awe and wonder. So it is good for them too and good for us.

The CHAIRMAN: One of the problems is we have had a program here over the years called Ribbons of Blue where schools associate with streams and monitor those streams. They are the sorts of programs that governments love to cut. Recreation programs in some of the areas we are talking about here have been run over the years, but they are the sorts of programs that governments like to cut. Is Mr Alexander talking about policy 13? Have you discussed this? One of our problems is that a range of policies here govern how close people get to these bodies of water, so I will not talk to you about that if you have not heard it, as there is no point. But we are going to have to make a decision. Policy 13 has the assumption that if you allow people close enough to water to see water, they will want to go to the water, so you keep them far enough away. So they can do the forest walk without seeing the water so they do not want to go to the water—those sorts of questions. What I am leading to is: is there any information other than the couple that you indicated that show the quality for a state government, which we are, to the value of linking not just children but also people with nature?

[10.28 am]

Mr Louv: The report out of Deakin University does address that to some extent within a park context. They do look into some of the economic benefits. Certainly we need more research on this. It has been under studied, but we do know that when houses are next to parkland, they are more valuable; the real estate properties are more valuable. I would assume that that is true for water as well. What I have suggested in the United States is that we need some city somewhere to do a full economic study of the impact of nature experience on that urban region. What we have now are

partial studies. We have studies of how many fishing licences get sold, the retail trade in outdoor equipment et cetera. What we do not have is a full study that takes into account human health, for instance—lower rates of mental illness, lower rates of obesity et cetera—and there is evidence now that there is a direct link to nature experience. There is a study that just came out in the United States that showed that in inner-city neighbourhoods, the greener they are—by “green”, I mean more nearby nature—the less child obesity there is. This was independent of population density. In other words, you can have a very dense neighbourhood but you have more green growth, you have more natural play spaces, naturalised school grounds et cetera. There is an economic pay-off for that. It may be longer term in terms of public health, with less money spent on diabetes, which is going to be a huge epidemic soon if it is not already. We have not really had an urban region do that kind of full economic study of the benefits of nature experience, and it should be done somewhere.

The CHAIRMAN: You have also alluded in the short time we have had to the fear process. Has anyone done any work that you are aware of on that fear process; that is, “I won’t let the kids walk into that bush because there’s going to be a snake in there”, whereas those of us who have been there know the snake goes away and the snake actually is not a problem? I think you have alluded to some of these fear factors that are growing in urban communities. Is there some body of work about those factors anywhere?

Mr Louv: Yes. I covered quite a bit of that—what was available at the time—in *Last Child in the Woods*, but there is increasing interest in that. It is not only fear of strangers; it is also fear of strange lawyers, the litigious society. I mean, families will think a long time. If they think about it very long, they will not let their kid build a tree house in the backyard because neighbourhood kids will come over and they will be at risk legally. So things that we took for granted as kids now are not accepted, and increasingly the housing developments, for instance, in the United States—I think this is happening to an extent here—have covenants and restrictions, which are private restrictions, that disallow all kinds of activity that we would have considered normal. I mean, just try to put up a basketball hoop in some of these neighbourhoods, let alone let the kids build a fort or a tree house. The covenants and restrictions say you cannot do that. That has increasingly happened in the US. So some of this is fear of litigation, as well as fear of strangers. This has affected the school districts. There is a huge school district in Florida—Broward County, Florida—that has put up “no running” signs on the playgrounds because of this fear of litigation. Then there is the fear of nature itself. The less that human beings have access to nature, not only do they not know where their food comes from, and literally many kids do not have a clue—the chicken comes from some place other than inside the plastic wrap, as you know—the less access they have to nature, the more they are afraid of it. Busloads of kids will arrive at a park in the United States, and they will get off the bus, and one of the first things that the kids will ask—teachers tell me this all the time—is, “Where are the lions and tigers?” and they are terrified. So that fear again of nature itself extracts a price as well.

The CHAIRMAN: The litigation one interests me, because part of our inquiry is about that, because access to water is not just about the water itself; it is about the state itself or state authorities having control of those water bodies; therefore, people jumping into pools and hitting rocks—those sorts of issues—are major reasons why those signs go up. So the agencies themselves do not get litigation against them.

Mr Louv: Yes, and that has to be part of a larger discussion. One of the things I wrote recently is a plea for an international conference on children, nature and the law, specifically because of some of the things we are talking about right now. There is a group called Common Good in the United States. It is the guy who wrote *The Death of Common Sense*. It is a book that you might look at on the website.

The CHAIRMAN: What was that, because I will have a look at that?

Mr Louv: I think it is commongood.org or .com, and he wrote the book *The Death of Common Sense*. It is about the litigious society. They have bipartisan support, and some people from right

and left are on his board, so it is not partisan. In the UK this conversation has been going on, as you probably know—litigious society—and there is one example that I actually cite in the book. There was a town in England that had a public lake; there was a public lake above the park. For generations families had gone there and picnicked and fished and had a great time and had physical exercise. It was good for health et cetera. Somebody got worried, after generations, about somebody getting hurt in that lake. They put up a fence around the lake. Before they could put up the signs, a kid got through to the lake, jumped in the lake and broke his neck. The kid survived but the family sued. The judge threw it out. What he wrote is very interesting. His last line was, “If a child falls out of a tree, does that mean we cut down the whole forest?” We really have to begin to ask questions of comparative risk. Paediatricians now say that they do not see very many broken bones among children—it used to be a right of passage. What they see now are repetitive stress injuries, which tend to last a lot longer than the typical broken bone. So I think comparative risk is the idea that we have to keep looking at, both in our culture but also within the legal system.

The CHAIRMAN: We have run out of time. It has been very interesting. Members, any questions?

Hon KEN BASTON: No. I can relate very well to a lot that you have said, having come from the land myself. I have often said that we are becoming very sanitised. The iconic Australia, where we could actually sit around a camp fire and boil a billy of tea, is actually fading. People are going to, dare I say it, sanitised places with stainless steel barbecues et cetera, et cetera, so we are really even shifting that, even though we have this great landmass. So I can relate to it well. With the tying up of water, we are so fortunate to have such a great coastline that I am probably leaning more towards the access of that and the concerns that I have about that getting locked up. It is that that is important for us. But it was very interesting.

Mr Alexander: I am interested in this idea that you might actually just lock up the inland and you have access to the coast. WA is closed for business in so many areas. There are so many camp sites that have just fallen like dominoes so that people can have their million-and-a-half-dollar houses at Eagle Bay. So it is certainly our belief that in a developed country like ours, we can see many examples—San Diego and some of those—where people can have managed access to the water. So often in our risk-averse society we get loaded up with fear, and then also sometimes sins of omission of information, that we cannot be developed enough to find a balance. One of the great concerns is this: “You can lock up the inland and I’ll go to the coast.” You cannot go to the coast unless you are in many cases making a simple day trip, and a lot of people cannot do that, and you certainly cannot find—and I would like you to find for me between here and Augusta how many places behind the sand hills families can go and camp at a reasonable rate. Those things have been closed down as well. So we have so many issues in this risk-averse society that they are producing a lot of the syndromes that Richard is talking about. We hear that you cannot immerse yourself in the water, and we all agree with that, but in other parts of the world and other parts of Australia they are managing that risk.

The CHAIRMAN: We may be talking to you in the not too distant future, obviously, but we do not have the opportunity to talk to Richard Louv very often. We really appreciate the opportunity. It is a pity that we cannot have a lunch with you and chew the fat, as we like to say. Nevertheless, I think most of us around here would have a lot in common with what you are saying. Our trick is to try to manage those complications we talked about. Thank you very much for your time. It was a very interesting address, and you have sold one more book at least!

Mr Louv: It was very much an honour to have spoken to you. Thank you.

Hearing concluded at 10.39 am