

# Nature Play Design Guidelines Support Growing Natural Interest in Connecting Children with Nature

*Principal Investigator: Allen Cooper, Director of Organizational Learning, National Wildlife Federation*

## Project Title:

This case study highlights a 2011 NUCFAC-recommended USDA Forest Service grant, *The Natural Play and Learning Areas National Guidelines Project*.

## Partners:

National Wildlife Federation, Natural Learning Initiative, Chicago Park District, Children & Nature Network, City Park Alliance, Keep America Beautiful, National Association for the Education of Young Children, North American Association of Environmental Educators, National Association of State Park Directors, National Recreation and Park Association, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Five Rivers Metro Parks, City of Austin, Mississippi Museum of Natural Science, Kalamazoo Nature Center, and Outdoor Discovery Center

### PROJECT GOAL

To restore children's relationship with nature through outdoor learning spaces.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW:

This project seeks to restore children's relationship with nature through outdoor learning spaces at schools, child-care centers, parks, museums, and zoos. The project resulted in design guidelines for nature play areas, which were published in a book, *Nature Play & Learning Places: Creating and Managing Places Where Children Connect with Nature*, which was downloaded over 2,000 times at publication. Additionally, the project developed demonstration play areas and established a website for dissemination of technical assistance and Best Management Practices (BMPs). The publication has become the definitive design guide for nature play areas now found in most communities and has led to other natural play area initiatives in North Carolina, Texas and South Carolina.

## REACH:

This project involved collaboration with 16 partner organizations. Five college students participated in the project and 295 volunteers built demonstration play areas. Over 4000 children visited just one of the five demonstration play areas. Efforts to promote the guidebook resulted in the following estimated reach:



**60,000** People reached through website<sup>1</sup>



**2,000** People reached through presentations<sup>2</sup>



**450,000** People reached through publications

<sup>1</sup> Website traffic assessed from Google Analytics.

<sup>2</sup> Conferences, workshops, and webinar presentations.



Since 1994, the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council (NUCFAC) has annually recommended urban and community forestry research and technology projects for funding by the US Forest Service. Working with the office of the Southern Regional Extension Forester, NUCFAC is assessing the difference this funding program has made in urban and community forestry.

“The National Wildlife Federation had an awareness for the need of scalable strategies to reconnect children and families with nature. We saw an interest in natural play areas as an expression of that.”

– Allen Cooper, Director of Organizational Learning, National Wildlife Federation

## PROJECT RESULTS & PRODUCTS:



## STAKEHOLDER UTILIZATION:

Stakeholders have reported that the guidebook has supported changes in practice in their agency or organization and that they have implemented the guidelines. The guidelines have also been used by stakeholders in the following activities or resources:

- Workshops/ Trainings
- Trade journal publications
- New Research Project

## CONTINUED PROJECT WORK & FUNDING:

### Continued Work on Project

Since completing the project, the guidelines have been used to advance nature play areas in early childhood settings in Texas, South Carolina, and Colorado.

### Additional Funding

A total of \$1.85 million has been received from state funding sources, including the Texas Department of State Health

Services (\$100,000) and the Colorado Health Foundation (\$1.75 million).

### How Additional Funding Furthers Project Outcome

Additional funding will be used to create several new play areas in Texas and over 120 play areas in Colorado. It also focused on expanding work to early childhood settings, professional development related to design and management of nature play areas in those settings, and policy change to support nature play areas.

## LEARN MORE:

The Nature Play & Learning Places guidelines can be found at:

[https://naturalearning.org/sites/default/files/Nature-Play-Learning-Places\\_storefront\\_preview\\_0.pdf](https://naturalearning.org/sites/default/files/Nature-Play-Learning-Places_storefront_preview_0.pdf)

Visit these websites to learn more about this project:

[www.natureplayandlearning.org](http://www.natureplayandlearning.org)

[www.parksandrecreation.org/2014/September/New-National-Guidelines-for-Nature-Play-Areas/](http://www.parksandrecreation.org/2014/September/New-National-Guidelines-for-Nature-Play-Areas/)

[www.nrpa.org/Blog/Natural-Play-New-Guidelines-Mean-New-Opportunity-for-Parks-and-Recreation/](http://www.nrpa.org/Blog/Natural-Play-New-Guidelines-Mean-New-Opportunity-for-Parks-and-Recreation/)

[http://m.sustainablecitynetwork.com/mobile/article\\_61762304-3d3d-11e4-8499-001a4bcf6878.html](http://m.sustainablecitynetwork.com/mobile/article_61762304-3d3d-11e4-8499-001a4bcf6878.html)

[www.playaustralia.org.au/new-guidelines-bring-nature-playevery-community](http://www.playaustralia.org.au/new-guidelines-bring-nature-playevery-community)

[http://conservationtools.org/library\\_items/1320](http://conservationtools.org/library_items/1320),

[www.teachers-going-green.com](http://www.teachers-going-green.com)