

Resisting the Call of the Virtual



Richard Louv is the author of "[Vitamin N: The Essential Guide to a Nature-Rich Life](#)," "[The Nature Principle: Reconnecting With Life in a Virtual Age](#)" and "[Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder](#)." He is chairman emeritus of the [Children and Nature Network](#).

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Can Pokémon Go enhance an appreciation for nature? A [recent report by the New York Times](#) describes "roving bands of people, lumbering around parks and monuments, smartphones in hands, staring intently at their screens." That seems more like a Zombie Invasion than the connection many of us hope people will experience.

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But the game does offer benefits. Like geocaching (using handheld G.P.S. units, including phones, for outdoor treasure hunts), Pokémon Go encourages [physical activity outdoors](#). It familiarizes people with parks they may never have visited. For kids with special needs or fears, the game can be a motivator and gateway. Among some players, it builds a sense of community. It's fun. And people have always used technology to connect with nature (consider binoculars and fishing rods). Supercharged digital devices, however, are uniquely powerful, and they deserve respectful questioning. Here's a litmus test: how long does it take a person to look up from the screen and actually *experience* the natural world? Does the device actually block that experience – or block it for others? Scientists who study the [human senses](#) no longer number them at five, but nine or 10, and probably more. Locked to our digital devices, we spend inordinate time and energy blocking out most of those senses. That's one definition of being less alive.

Games like Pokémon Go, or the communities that form around them, could eventually score higher on the nature-attention test. Hints of such possibilities already exist. Pokémon players looking for virtual creatures are sighting a few real ones — reptiles, insects, birds and mystery plants — then posting digital photos of them on social media. One scientist launched the hashtag [#PokeBlitz](#) to help players identify the real world critters they encounter. When linked with animal-count programs, digital games and gadgets can also be used to track and protect endangered species. There are, of course, dozens of other ways that digital technology can be used to encourage the experience of nature.

Modern technology isn't inherently bad or good, but daily, monthly, yearly, lifelong electronic *immersion* in it, without a force to balance, can drain our ability to pay attention, to think clearly, to be productive and creative. It's surprising how many technology leaders own off-the-grid cabin retreats. They know they need some distance from the digital world; they need time to reboot, to restore their creativity. Some have adopted strict limits of digital immersion for their own kids. More than most of us, they understand the power they're dealing with. I hope they become true leaders in the movement to connect children and adults to the natural world, and not just by producing new virtual realities. The more high-tech our lives become, the more nature we need.