

Nature Commons: Building a shared online infrastructure to help engage children with nature

Prepared by Forum One Communications as a response to the Conservation Fund's "National Forum on Children and Nature" (http://www.conservationfund.org/children_nature). This proposal has been reviewed and approved in the first stage of the process but we declined to proceed with phase two. More information is available at http://www.conservationfund.org/sites/default/files/General_instructions.pdf.

Nature Commons: Building a shared online infrastructure to help engage children with nature by [Forum One Communications](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 United States License](#).

Contact David Witzel, email: dwitzel@forumone.com, phone: +1 571-641-3029

The National Forum on Children and Nature (NFCN) is at the nexus of two issues high on the national agenda - children's health and the environment. We have high confidence that increasing children's engagement with nature will lead to both healthier children and a better environment. We already see that organizations focused on children are trying to make them more active. Organizations focused on the environment would like to engage more with kids. And we are seeing new programs from government, foundations, non-profits, and even the commercial sector focus on these issues.

Unfortunately, many of these efforts, while well-intentioned, will not be as productive as they could be. They will be duplicative, unable to successfully reach children, not scalable, too short term, and not well-integrated with nature. Too often these programs will see kids' organizations floundering with environment and environmental organizations struggling to engage with kids.

We will improve all of these efforts with the "Children Engaging with Nature Commons" program (CENC). CENC will support and improve the performance of existing programs and attract more programs to this focus. CENC will provide Internet infrastructure so groups can reach and interact with children safely; present accessible, interesting activities outdoors; motivate participation not just once but repeatedly; and help track progress. CENC is something many organizations can use with great benefit, but which none is likely to create alone.

We will create a type of marketplace, including substantial incentives and wide access, where kids and nature come together; where different organizations integrate their work and resources to create a larger overall impact. Think of it as "eBay" for kids' activities with nature a central part of its daily operations. Organizations will deploy this infrastructure because it expands their reach, increases their marketing visibility, lets them specialize in what they do best, and reduces their costs.

The CENC concept implies a large, dynamic, network of participating organizations with reasonably open and flexible membership; a true marketplace which attracts new participants because it facilitates easy and value-added connections between the different organizations without the need for much central management. Commercial, not-for-profit, and government organizations interested in promoting and supporting kids' activities or nature activities will be eligible to use the infrastructure as long as they agree to basic standards of participation.

Organizations we would hope to participate include:

- PBSKids one of the most heavily used kids' websites on the Internet;
- Backyard Jungle Forum One's popular kids and nature website;
- Privo a user registration company that manages COPPA compliance;
- Kaboom!, a non-profit encouraging kids to be more active;
- SCETV, South Carolina's Educational Television Commission;
- the National Wildlife Federation's Green Hour and Great American Backyard Campout programs;
- the African Wildlife Foundation's online programs (<http://www.awf.org>) which don't target kids, but nevertheless attract thousands online annually;
- the urban-youth educational programs of California's Mono Lake Committee;
- the rural/island, suburban, and urban youth educational and exchange programs of Maine's Island Institute;
- the North Carolina Museum of Science and Life; and
- Jane Goodall Institute's international Roots and Shoots educational programs for kids based on a local-club model.

CENC will increase the number of children going outdoors, the time spent there, and activities done. With deliberate partnering we will reach inner city and disadvantaged youth and broaden the meaning of "engagement with nature" to include cities and towns.

Based on our experience designing, building, and operating PBSKids Backyard Jungle, as well as participating in over 1000 other online strategy and development projects, we understand that there are four likely failure points:

First, it is difficult to get the attention of children and, if you get their attention, difficult to engage with them in a way that preserves their safety and security. CENC will aggregate an audience of children while assuring their COPPA-compliant safety and privacy.

Second, while there are a multitude of opportunities to engage with nature, matching opportunity with engaged kid is hit and miss. CENC will aggregate information about outdoors spaces friendly to kids; assemble schedules of activities; organize rankings of activities; and provide guidance to adult custodians.

Third, even given interesting places to go and valuable things to do, kids may not be motivated or, even more likely, stay motivated. Thus, CENC will introduce incentives to hook kids on nature. The incentives will include point systems that reward kids for increased activity, ways for kids to share stories and encourage each other to do more, a catalogue of rewards that kids can earn by participating, and a journal that allows them to track their accomplishments.

Finally, it is very difficult to tell if programs are working -- are kids going outside, are they engaging in nature -- CENC will provide tools to track, across programs, kids' activity and engagement.

CENC is intended to be inherently and hugely scalable. It enables a network of partners and supports long-term involvement as well as one-off events. We will support local non-profits focused on specific parks or activities, after-school programs, schools, large organizations and properties including National Parks and conservation areas, and commercial marketing campaigns focused on children's health or the environment.

Participating organization will be able to "plug into" CENC for the services they need. CENC will typically operate in the background, as a silent partner. Simultaneously, participants will be improving CENC by building the membership list, informing the activities database, contributing to the catalogue of rewards, and more.

We expect that awareness of CENC will encourage organizations to orient their programs towards children's engagement with nature, greatly increasing resources in this space. For example, HopeLabs is focused on children's obesity and launched a competition for products that will increase kids' activity. Their recent partnership with Backyard Jungle, however, focuses on outdoors activities. Many more efforts can be redirected to focus on children engaging with nature, with a little encouragement.

While the initial infrastructure will imply development costs and there will be ongoing operational and support costs, these costs will be moderate. Moreover, the services offered can be priced to recoup most operating costs, perhaps on a sliding scale informed by organizational size and type. For example commercial organizations may pay for access to the membership service or be required to contribute rewards to the catalogue in exchange for their participation. Depending on how it is structured, we expect the service could be self-sustaining or need relatively small ongoing subsidies even at large scale.

We expect to see impact on multiple dimensions and the characteristics of CENC will make results very tangible. We expect to see steady increases in the number of organizations participating, children reached, places available to visit, and activities listed to do. Moreover, we will be able to see and report on the number and kinds of activities

engaged in supplemented by reactions from participating individuals. We will be able to compare the success and characteristics of programs creating a genuine learning laboratory for participating organizations.

Our objective is to make all participating organizations more effective. The philosophy being that, if all programs were 10% more successful every year, the total impact would be huge. We can help drive this sustained improvement with the added benefit that we will actually encourage more participation by motivating new programs towards children and nature.

While our numbers are admittedly soft, we think it is entirely plausible to see 75 programs participate in the first year of CENC's availability reaching roughly 1/2 million children and for these numbers to double every year to 300 programs and 2 million children in year three and 1200 programs and 8 million children in year 5. While ambitious, these estimates are below the growth we see for other successful online ventures.