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TO: Interested Parties

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RE: Key Findings from National Survey of American Youth

DATE: September 20, 2011

The bipartisan polling team of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R) recently conducted a survey American youth to assess the time they spend in nature and their connections with the environment.¹ The survey was funded by **The Nature Conservancy**, **The Toyota USA Foundation**, and the **Foundation for Youth Investment** as part of their ongoing efforts to strengthen connections between American youth and the natural world around them.

Among the key specific findings of the research are the following:

- **American youth are not spending as much time in nature as they spend on other indoor activities.** Currently 88% of American youth say that they spend time on-line every day, with 69% playing video games or watching TV with that same level of frequency. Both represent far greater proportions than say they do homework or study for school every day (58%).

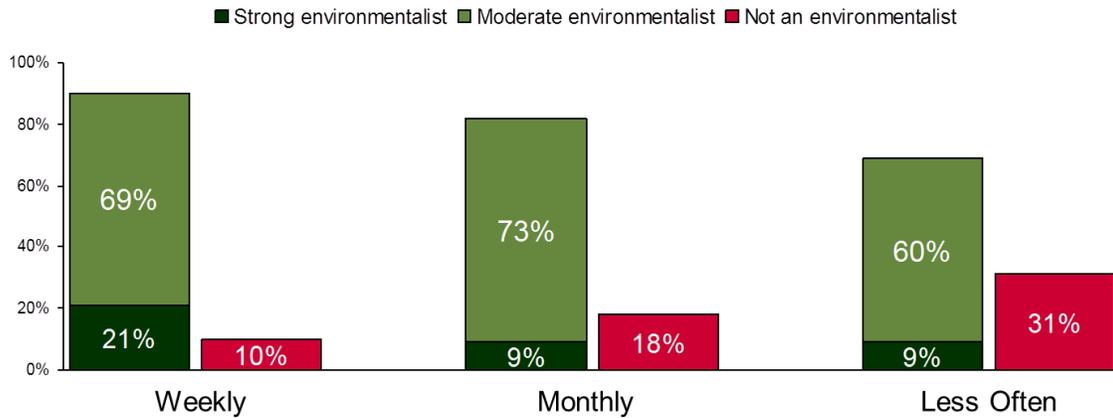
But youth participate in all of these activities far more than they spend time outdoors. Fewer than two in five American youth participate in any of these activities on even a *weekly* basis:

- ✓ *Going hiking outside*
 - ✓ *Going fishing or hunting*
 - ✓ *Visiting a local park, creek or beach in a city or town*
 - ✓ *Visiting a national or state park outside a city*
 - ✓ *Visiting a natural area outdoors*
- **American youth are unhappy with the condition of the environment, and lack faith in adults to address it.** A majority of American youth (51%) rate “the condition of the

environment and nature” as an “extremely” or “very serious” problem. And they place the blame squarely on previous generations. Nearly three-quarters (73%) agree that “previous generations have damaged our environment and left it to our generation to fix it.” And youth lack faith in government to address this or any other major problem – only one-third believe that government leaders are doing a “good job addressing major problems facing our country.”

- **Regular participants in certain outdoor activities are more likely to say they have had a meaningful experience in nature.** Those who participate in a variety of outdoor activities on at least a weekly basis are far more likely to “strongly agree” that they have had an experience in nature that makes them appreciate it more, in particular:
 - ✓ *52% of those who visit national or state parks;*
 - ✓ *49% of those who camp overnight;*
 - ✓ *49% of those who hike outdoors;*
 - ✓ *47% who participate in youth groups with an outdoor focus;*
 - ✓ *47% of those who volunteer for environmental events; and*
 - ✓ *46% of those who fish and hunt...*
 - ✓ *...in comparison to just 29% of American youth as a whole.*
- **The data suggest that if American youth are given more opportunities to have a meaningful experience outdoors, they will be more likely to value nature, engage with it, and feel empowered to do something about it.** The survey shows that 66% of youth say that they “have had a personal experience in nature” that made them appreciate it more. That subset of American youth is markedly different from those who have *not* had such experiences. They are:
 - ✓ *Almost twice as likely to say they prefer spending time outdoors;*
 - ✓ *Significantly more likely to express concern about water pollution, air pollution, global warming, and the condition of the environment;*
 - ✓ *Ten points more likely to agree that we can solve climate change by acting now;*
 - ✓ *13 points more likely to say environmental protection should be prioritized over economic growth;*
 - ✓ *More than twice as likely to “strongly agree” that protecting the environment is “cool;”*
 - ✓ *More than twice as likely to consider themselves a “strong environmentalist,” and*
 - ✓ *Substantially more likely to express interest in studying the environment in college, working in a job related to nature, or joining an environmental club at their school.*
- **In addition, there is a connection between the frequency of time youth spend in nature and their environmental attitudes.** As shown in **Figure 1**, those who spend time in natural areas on at least a weekly basis are more likely to label themselves “environmentalists.”

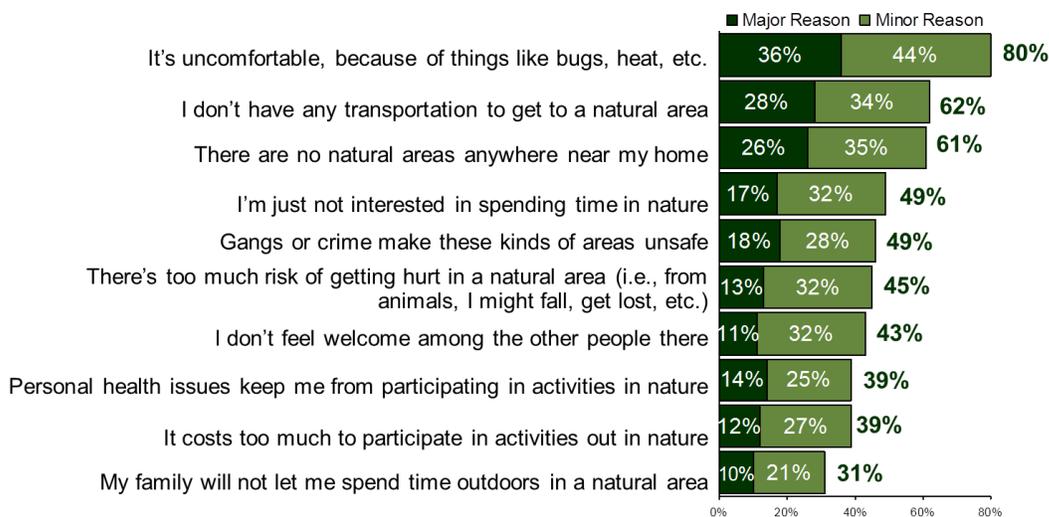
**FIGURE 1:
Connection Between Frequency of Time in Nature and Identification as an Environmentalist**



So if the data show that having meaningful experiences in nature leads to more environmental engagement, the key question remains: how can we get youth to spend more time outdoors in nature?

- **The key obstacles to overcome in getting youth to spend more time in nature are a lack of access, a lack of interest, and feelings of discomfort.** As shown in **Figure 2**, four in five American youth say that the discomfort of nature (bugs, heat or cold, etc.) is a reason they do not spend time in nature. Three in five point to concerns related to access (there is no natural area nearby, or they do not have a way to get there) and almost half say they simply are not interested.

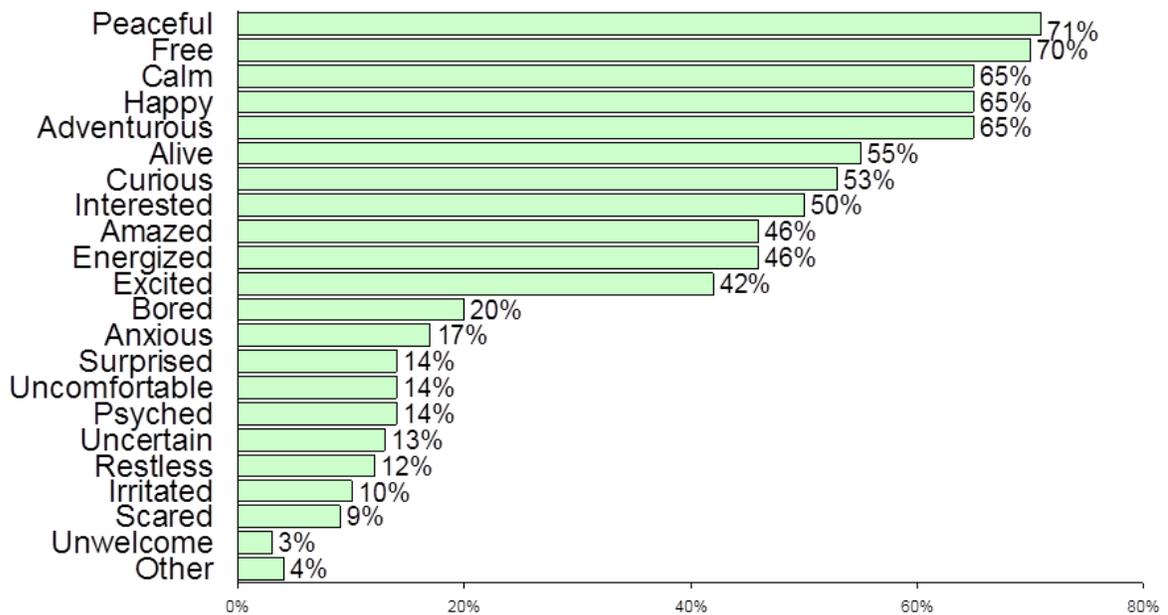
**FIGURE 2:
Reasons Youth Do Not Spend More Time in Nature**



There are other barriers for particular subsets of youth. Concern about **gangs and crime** is far more acute for youth who live in big cities, youth of color, girls, and those who are less

- ✓ *Turn their schools inside out* – Fewer than one-quarter of youth say they go on school field trips outdoors on even a monthly basis. Yet teens we interviewed spoke fondly of school experiences that went beyond the classroom. School activities represent a great opportunity to engage kids with nature.
- ✓ *Turn peer pressure into a positive* – Among youth who regularly spend time in nature, nearly four in five (79%) report having done so with their friends. In fact, young people we spoke to talk about deciding communally with friends how to spend their free time. Not surprisingly then, more than nine in ten would pay attention to a friend’s encouragement to spend more time in nature.
- ✓ *Give them a place to escape their stresses and fears* – Youth have a lot on their minds – sizable majorities rate bullying, crime and the quality of public education as “extremely” or “very serious” problems. But as shown in **Figure 4** below, youth are more likely to associate being in nature with being peaceful, free, calm, and happy than with any other characteristic.

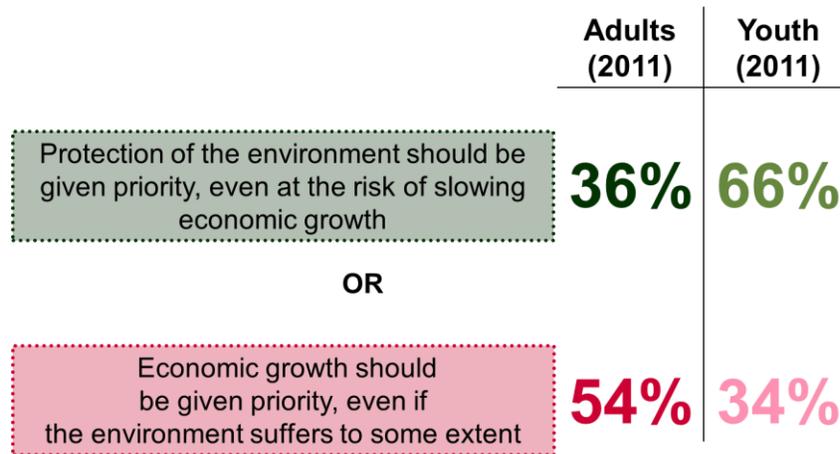
**FIGURE 4:
Phrases Most Often Chosen by Youth to Describe How They Feel Being in Nature**



- **There is great potential to mobilize American youth around issues related to the environment and nature.** National polling shows that American adults – by a wide margin – are likely to say that economic growth should take priority over environmental protection.¹ However, youth are more likely to say that the priority should be placed on environmental protection, as shown in **Figure 5** on the following page.

¹ National Gallup survey of 1,021 adults in the continental US, March 3-6, 2011.

**FIGURE 5:
Choice of Statements About the Environment and the Economy,
Among Adults and Youth**



This finding underscores that American youth do not lack for concern about the environment, or desire that it be protected. In fact, 86 percent go so far as to say that it is “cool” to do things to protect the environment. What they lack are opportunities to engage more meaningfully with nature. The more youth are given the chance to get involved with nature, the more their instinctive concern about the environment can be solidified and cemented into long-term commitment to protecting it.

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ⁱ **Methodology:** From July 28 to August 4, 2011, FM3 and POS completed 602 on-line interviews with American youth between the ages of 13 and 18. Quotas were established to ensure representativeness of the sample by age, gender, geography, and race.