







Creating wilder nature play spaces is more difficult. A fair dose of naturalist's knowledge is needed to design playscapes that mimic and/or complement local habitats. Patience and care are necessary, too, as new plants and habitats need time to take root and thrive – and thus these spaces may be more fragile at first. Yet they get better and stronger every year as the plantings mature, multiply, and attract more and more mini-beasts – while purchased play equipment is usually static and inevitably degrades over time. Plus, wild play areas commonly cost less to create than their built counterparts.



*Bonding with a frog. Admittedly, it may be a one-way bonding!  
(Photo thanks to Carmen Field.)*

Additionally, authentic nature play spaces can offer a degree of real ecological value, since their microhabitats benefit birds, insects, small mammals, and endless other life forms. In school settings, this real nature can support legitimate natural science lessons – a nice addition to the space's inherent play value. The conservation benefits of wild play spaces are also a good reflection on the values of the host school, organization, or homeowner.

In actual practice, the design of natural play areas is rarely a black-and-white issue. Rather, it is a spectrum of options that stretch from preformed and plastic on one end, to authentic and awesome on the other. Various points on the spectrum can serve different purposes. An artificial, chosen-from-a-catalog nature classroom is less likely to help kids fall in love with the natural world, but it can still fuel their holistic development – thus making it effective for some constituencies.

However, rich and authentic nature play spaces can claim this same portfolio of developmental impacts *and* robustly foster life-long bonds with nature. So shouldn't that duality be a central goal for *every* nature play space? Environmental organizations, especially, should embrace more authentic approaches to nature play, and should also promote it as a powerful and appealing conservation strategy that supports their mission. Yet even these groups needn't be absolute purists in the design of nature playscapes. There is always room for fun components like a tree house, recycled "loose parts" for construction play, or extra tree stumps to hop on – so long as they don't supplant the site's *real* nature.

### *Nature Play as Social Change*

Currently our country's support for conservation is tenuous, at best. When sophisticated opinion polls gauge public priorities for a broad range of national issues, the environment does not fare well. Amidst that reality, a thin green line of concerned citizens and dedicated professionals stands as the primary safeguard against further environmental deterioration and the harm it will inflict on our grandchildren's future.

Nature play has a vital role to fulfill in strengthening that thin line: nurturing the emotional foundations of conservation values in future generations of citizens. To best serve that purpose, Green Hearts ardently believes that high quality nature play spaces should chiefly entail rich, diverse natural habitats enhanced by other genuine natural features. In the best and most influential nature play spaces, any artificial components will only augment the site's true, authentic nature – *never* serve as a substitute for it!



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