It is the end of school and class parties, movies and day dreaming are on the agenda. The end of school means summer vacations, pool parties and trips to theme parks—maybe. Many of our youth will be inside watching television, playing video games or on the computer connected to who knows what. But, there are other options.

Consider sending your child or someone else's to summer camp. Give local youth opportunities to enjoy the outdoors and get away from electronic baby sitters. They can meet other kids in a supervised setting, interact with desirable adult role models and learn while they have FUN.

I am in my current career because I was given a chance to go to camp. I went to the Youth Conservation Camp (YCC) in West Palm Beach operated by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (then called Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission).

I later became a camp counselor and assistant instructor at their other YCC in the Ocala National Forest. The Ocala Youth Camp as it is now called, is located on Lake Eaton. This year marks their 50th as a youth camp.

I continued to work at summer camp while in college at two old 4-H camps in the Ocala National Forest. They were rustic pine cabins built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the '40's. There I met many county extension agents and worked with hundreds of youth from across the state. I decided to continue my college studies and incorporate my work with youth. I was able to take my horticulture degree and match it with youth development while I got my Master of Agriculture degree in Agricultural and Extension Education. I feel a lot of this started with a chance to go to camp.

At camp, we swam, played games and sang songs; typical activities at most camps, whether at day camps near home or in far away places … across the state.

We also learned to catch fish. We tied fishing knots, learned how to rig a cane pole and a spinning rod, put bait on the hook and actually landed bluegill and shell crackers from the lake. I still enjoy fishing, but catching is more fun.

I have a canoe today because I was in canoeing class that first summer. We learned how to make the canoe go where we wanted it to, fell out on purpose and found out how to safely get back in and back to shore. The technique is not something you want to learn by trial and error when you are on rough water with a thunderstorm approaching.

Instructors took us on nature walks in the woods nearby. I observed beauty in a natural setting. I bottle-fed a fawn whose mother had been killed on the highway. I also watched the cycle of life as our rehabilitated red shouldered hawk fed on white mice reared in the animal compound.

Camp taught me to look and listen and discovered how plants and animals interrelate and depend on each other. I also learned how people depend on each other. We had 12 girls in a cabin sharing close quarters and chores. Many kids learned how to make their beds, keep their area neat and clean and sweep. I still have many close friends from camp years ago.

Archery was one of my favorite activities. It inspired me to take a class in college and later get my own bow. I have a practice target in my back yard.

I learned a lot about conservation and ecology at YCC. I also learned about firearm safety and earned a hunter safety certificate and patch during the week at camp. Today, at camp, youth learn about nature
and safety even if they don't ever plan to hunt. Law enforcement officials explain that everyone should learn how to be safe around guns to avoid tragic accidents.

Summer camp experiences have lasting impacts. I have spoken to many others who worked or attended camp and they share similar stories of how those experiences have had tremendous impact on their career and their personal recreation interests. I have seen how camp has had an impact on youth by developing life long interests, hobbies and friendships. I have watched youth build leadership skills and learn to be helpful community citizens.

Summer camps are great for kids and help them be better grown-ups. Want more information on summer camps with an outdoor theme? Have a child that might benefit from summer camp? Would you like to make a donation to support youth that need a scholarship to attend camp? Contact me for brochures at (321) 697-3000 or email efoe@osceola.org. Please share your summer camp success stories with me. Let me know if you worked or attended one of these camps as we are planning a reunion. Links to summer camps are listed on our Extension website at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu/nat/natrec.htm.

Eleanor Foerste
Natural Resources Agent
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
(321) 697-3000
Fax (321) 697-3010
efoe@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
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