



# ECO-CAMPS FOR KIDS

by Gail Condrick

Just the mention of summer camp evokes parents' memories of communal living, new challenges and outdoor fun in close encounters with nature's wonders. Today's new generation of eco-friendly camps for our kids offer all of these experiences and more.

As the Sierra Club notes: "Camping today includes the traditional fun of being outdoors in a group and [at the same time] can also be an experience in eco-friendly living and practices." Families looking for the perfect green summer camp will find programs for every child, from the nature neophyte to a budding biologist or environmental activist. Campers can choose to dig into organic farming, naturalist explorations, conscious living classes, green building programs or even sustainable living projects in exotic places.

Camp has always proved a perfect time to unplug from daily routines and connect with the extraordinary. As Peg Smith, CEO of the American Camp Association, observes: "Camps have been introducing children to the wonder and beauty of the natural world for 150 years." Fortunately, the trend continues, in spades.

## What's in Store

Eco-friendly camps can prove to be both an educational and experiential immersion in the living of green values for a child, establishing a pattern for life. Many camps mirror the sustainable practices families follow at home, like using energy-saving devices, composting and encouraging healthy eating and organic gardening.

For example, campers entering kindergarten through sixth grade like experiencing farm life at the Gwynn Valley Camp, in North Carolina ([GwynnValley.com](http://GwynnValley.com)). Youngsters pick vegetables from the organic garden, milk the cows and gather eggs. This camp grows 70 percent of its food and has implemented many energy-saving practices.

In Maryland, at Camp Calleva's sustainable farm ([Calleva.org](http://Calleva.org)), attendees learn about environmentally friendly design through hands-on alternative energy projects that

**“Today’s camps are adaptive and responsive to the needs of today’s families, mentoring tomorrow’s leaders—our children—in navigating the future.”**

~ Peg Smith, CEO, American Camp Association

change each year. Their Build Green and Grow Green weeks, for instance, have engaged campers in building a rainwater collection system for crops and farm animals, a biofuel project and this summer, a windmill alternative energy design.

Likewise, the Green River Preserve, in North Carolina ([GreenRiverPreserve.org](http://GreenRiverPreserve.org)), offers environmental programs for the academically gifted, creative and curious. Kids take daily hikes with naturalist mentors, learning the science behind their experiences, and help harvest, eat and compost vegetables grown onsite. Of course, traditional camp activities add to the fun. The camp partners with the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, which encourages caring stewardship of Planet Earth.

Teens from 13 to 17 years old enjoy programs offered at the Omega Teen Camp, in Holmes, New York (search Teen Camp at [eomega.org](http://eomega.org)). On top of outdoor adventures, the camp offers 50 class selections, from dance, yoga and Tai chi to meditation and “Face Your Fears” consciousness classes. When it’s time for dinner, they enjoy vegetarian and organic food selections, with most meals made from scratch.

Know a mature teen, ready for travel and community service? BoldEarth Adventures’ ([BoldEarth.com](http://BoldEarth.com)) summer camps include between six and 40 hours of service. Participants might plant and harvest organic vegetables in rural Ecuador, rehabilitate wild animals at an Amazon conservation project, or help restore hiking trails in Colorado.



## Find the Best Green Camp

Start an informed search for eco-style kids camps by region, activities, special needs and age groups at [AmericanCamp Association.com](http://AmericanCampAssociation.com) and [ChoiceCamps.com](http://ChoiceCamps.com). Individual camp websites typically state their mission and philosophy, camper/staff ratio, counselor qualifications, facility accreditation and camp building and operating practices that promote green living.

**“I regard it as the foremost task of education to ensure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity; an undefeatable spirit; tenacity in pursuit; readiness for sensible self-denial; and, above all, compassion.”**

~ Kurt Hahn, founder, Outward Bound

The U.S. Outward Bound program serves 70,000 kids annually from centers in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Denver, San Francisco and other sites nationwide.

For families who prefer to explore close to home, the Sierra Club gives tips to turn any backyard into a year-round environmental adventure camp. One suggestion involves putting up a tent, unfolding sleeping bags and grabbing flashlights for an outdoor evening looking up at the stars (search Backyard Camping at [SierraClub.org](http://SierraClub.org)).

Summer is far from the only season for Earth-oriented experiences. Young people can make the most of environmental programs sponsored by local parks and recreation departments, Scout troops, schools and churches, any time they're offered.

## Benefits of the Natural World

Camp allows kids to take a break from electronics and breathe in a renewed sense of nature's daily miracles. Connecting to nature fights the "nature deficit syndrome," spotlighted in Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods*, in which he comments on the state of too many of our youth today: "A kid today can likely tell you about the Amazon rain forest—but not about the last time he or she explored the woods in solitude, or lay in a field listening to the wind and watching the clouds move." Louv is founder of the Children and Nature Network ([ChildrenAndNature.org](http://ChildrenAndNature.org)).

Whether our perfect eco-camp is educational or sustainable, in the mountains or under a backyard tent, the experience of just being in nature can be life-changing for a child and for the whole family.

Connect with Gail Condrick, writer and workshop leader, at [GaelaVisions.com](http://GaelaVisions.com).

## More Youth Wilderness Adventures

4-H Summer Camps  
[4-H.org](http://4-H.org)

Big City Mountaineers Wilderness Program  
[BigCityMountaineers.org](http://BigCityMountaineers.org)

Boy Scout Camps  
[Scouting.org](http://Scouting.org)

Earth School Wilderness Skills  
[LoveTheEarth.com](http://LoveTheEarth.com)

Girl Scout Camps  
[GirlScouts.org](http://GirlScouts.org)

Quiet Heart Wilderness School  
[QuietHeart.org](http://QuietHeart.org)

Two Coyotes Wilderness School  
[TwoCoyotes.org](http://TwoCoyotes.org)

YMCA Summer Camps  
[YMCA-Summer-Camps.com](http://YMCA-Summer-Camps.com)

Other Youth Adventure Camps  
Search [MySummerCamps.com](http://MySummerCamps.com)

# Outward Bound

## Eco-Adventures Instill Confidence and Character

by Karen Adams

When Jon Howard was a shy 16-year-old, he took a four-day canoe trip on Florida's Peace River with Outward Bound that changed his life. "I came away with a belief inside me that no matter what happened in my life, I could deal with it," he says. Today, he directs the organization's national at-risk program from his office in Tallahassee, helping kids from around the country similarly gain inner strength.

"Many people think of Outward Bound as a physical experience," Howard says. "It is, but it's also mental and emotional. When you align all three, that's when it's most powerful."

When Katie Pastuszek was 14, she spent 10 days backpacking and rock climbing in the West Virginia wilderness. Her Outward Bound-designed trip instilled a deep love of nature and taught her that she could take on unimagined challenges. "Those characteristics stay with a person for life," she says. Today, Pastuszek serves as executive director of Outward Bound's Philadelphia center.

The pioneer in adventure-based education programs, Outward Bound has been building confidence, character, leadership and a sense of service in young people around the world for 70 years. Today, the organization is active in 34 countries, with more than a million alumni in the United States alone.

All Outward Bound programs challenge participants to go beyond their own self-perceptions. Some trips venture into the wilderness; others explore urban environments and new neighborhoods, where kids often provide community services. They all learn life skills.

"Their experiences help these kids overcome challenges when they go back to their daily lives, whether they face gangs or bullies or other pressures," says Jeff Baierlein, executive director of the Baltimore/Chesapeake Bay center. They see their lives differently, he says, and they learn to make good choices, which often include new activities, peers and goals.

By the end of an Outward Bound trip, all the kids share a sense of respect and belonging. "No matter who they are," concludes Howard, "they definitely become aware that they're part of a bigger picture."

For more information, visit [OutwardBound.org](http://OutwardBound.org).

Karen Adams is a Natural Awakenings editor and freelance writer.