

San Diego Children and Nature Collaborative: Inspiring Communities to Reconnect Children to Nature

Text of proposal submitted to Sempra Energy, Environmental Champion Awards

20-word summary: Offer more nature experiences for families and schoolchildren, inspire communities to reconnect children to nature, and support nature program providers.

Amount: \$50,000

Description of program and how it contributes and/or impacts the community.

This program will advance the mission and goals of the **San Diego Children and Nature Collaborative (SDCaN)** by providing families and schoolchildren greater access to nature experiences, informing community-based organizations about the health, developmental, and emotional benefits of outdoor experiences in nature, and strengthening learning opportunities and resource sharing among SDCaN participants.

SDCaN brings the national **Children and Nature (CN&N)** movement to San Diego, replicating and building on successful programs in more than 60 cities and states.

In 2005, Richard Louv, local columnist, author, and resident, wrote the book “Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder” that inspired a national Children and Nature movement which has grown exponentially and engaged hundreds of organizations and agencies nationally and internationally. CN&N was created to encourage and support those working to reconnect children and families with nature, promote fundamental institutional change, and provide resources for sharing information, strategic initiatives and success stories (www.childrenandnature.org). Until January, the San Diego region was absent from this national movement, that “native son” Louv had inspired.

The local **SDCaN Collaborative** was “born” on January 28, 2009 when thirty passionate individuals made a commitment to invite their organizations and communities to attend Louv’s presentation on February 24, and build on the value and power of children playing and learning, in nature. SDCaN participants are dedicated to advancing the national Children and Nature movement and to increase local capacity to serve more children. Organizing meetings with 40-70 participants were held on March 19, May 19 and July 16. A Steering Group meets monthly, and has drafted a mission statement and strategic goals that were reviewed and adopted by the larger group. The mission of the SDCaN is to “inspire communities to nurture, empower, and engage youth in cultivating their relationship with nature.” Goals for the next three years are to:

- Goal 1-Increase public awareness of the value of nature and outdoor experiences
- Goal 2-Enhance schools’ ability to connect children to nearby nature
- Goal 3-Partner with community groups to value, promote and provide opportunities for outdoor experiences

- Goal 4-Drive change in attitudes, skills and behaviors that lead to positive relationships with nature
- Goal 5-Promote learning, sharing and networking
- Goal 6-Build sustainable organization to support mission

Accomplishments of the San Diego Children and Nature Collaborative (SDCaN) in the first seven months include:

- “Seed” money attracted (\$100 contributed by 10 individuals in January=\$1000, and \$5,000 grant from the Tippitt Foundation to Audubon Society for staff support)
- City and County of San Diego both declared April as “Children and Nature Awareness” month
- Bi-monthly meetings, Steering Committee establishment, mission and strategic goals
- Interest groups for Health, Families, Gardens, Schools, and Communication organized
- Website www.sdchildrenandnature.org, Yahoo list serve, and Facebook site established
- Project to develop and distribute local habitat supplements to textbooks and curriculum initiated
- National resources used, including Organizing Guide, Nature Clubs for Families Toolkit, and Nature Rocks
- National CN&N meetings attended in 2008 and 2009

Describe the need and objectives of this program/project.

Children need time in nature. Nature-centered experiences are those that instill wonder and engender curiosity; take place in outdoor settings ranging from backyards to neighborhoods to city parks to wilderness; and occur in the form of guided activities as well as unstructured nature play. Extensive research shows that children spend 40 to 65 hours/week in front of electronic devices; that fewer than 1 in 5 children walk or ride a bike to school; that childhood obesity has increased from 4% in the 1960s to 20% today; and that children have less time for unstructured, creative play in the outdoors than any time in history.

Research has established that children are happier, healthier and smarter when they connect with nature; that nature play increases self esteem, improves psychological health and reduces stress; that children learn self-discipline and are more cooperative; that nature play stimulates creativity and improves problem solving; and that nature play improves physical conditioning and reduces obesity. With nature experiences, children get a sense of place and discover that the world is bigger than their own neighborhood—noticing changes with the seasons, seeing the night sky and stars, hearing and watching wildlife. Children notice the difference that cleanup and restoration work makes, and they develop lifelong commitments to stewardship of the environment and their community. Schools discover that field trips to local nature are easy and “free,” and families discover that nature, learning, fitness, and community service projects are low- or no-cost and are very rewarding.

Children and Nature providers need resources and support. More than 200 participants completed surveys in February and March to declare their interests and desired outcomes of working together, and the proposed activities support these.

- They want to list nature places and activities, and ensure access to and safety of local places for nature guides and families
- They recognize the value of articulating why nature is important for children, getting kids and parents to say, “I want to go [to nature] on my own,” and gain “more voices” for nature and children
- They see a synergy, “we’ve all done this separately, how can it be grander if we learn and work more together?”
- They want to create a structure that is “open” and allows for people with different interests and skill levels, new people to join each meeting/event, and both regular and occasional contributions
- They recognize that communities need to reconnect to the values of nature for quality of life, sense of community, ecosystem services, places to walk and watch wildlife, and more

When objectives are met, this program will result in more nature experiences for families and schoolchildren (family clubs and schools), enhanced community awareness (Ambassadors, website), and expanded capacity of San Diego organizations to this program. It can make a small but significant contribution to San Diego’s nature by strengthening and integrating the efforts of many individual and organizations contribute to the national Children and Nature movement.

Provide the goals of the program and the methods being used to achieve the objective.

The SDCaN will undertake six activities that directly contribute to strategic goals. They will be accomplished by staff, interns (families, Ambassadors, website), consultants (website), nature program providers (school field trips), and volunteers.

Family Nature Clubs. Goal 3-Partner with community groups to value, promote and provide opportunities for outdoor experiences.

Objective: Facilitate establishment of five active, geographically-diverse Family Nature Clubs.

Methods:

- Identify existing family activity groups, structures, and communication systems (“meet-up,” social network sites, San Diego Family Magazine, etc.)
- Prepare focused materials with local resources, rationale, and Nature Clubs for Families toolkit
- Advise new groups, by Ambassador attending organizing event, leading first hike, and mentoring group leader
- Emphasize realistic expectations and safety provisions for outings/walks (short distances, exploring and observing, sunscreen, poison oak identification/avoidance)

Nearby Nature School Field Trips. Goal 2- Enhance schools’ ability to connect children to nearby nature.

Objective: Introduce in-nature field trips in five schools, for 500 students.

Methods:

- Identify prospective schools, nearby nature areas, and nature field trip providers (from SDCaN participants)

- Develop presentation that outlines benefits, connection to state curriculum standards, field trips procedures (and low costs), and nearby natural areas
- Meet with teachers, principal, PTA, and field trip provider to plan nature field trip
- Lead five field trips at each school, each with about 20 students

Website Redesign. Goal 1-Increase public awareness of the value of nature and outdoor experiences. Goal 5-Promote learning, sharing and networking.

Objective: Design, create, and manage interactive website.

Methods:

- Consult SDCaN participants and community members about the functionality and content
- Create structure, graphics, and platform
- Launch website as “pilot,” solicit feedback, and adjust
- Select content managers from SDCaN participants to keep site current
- Retain technical administrator to resolve technical difficulties
- Website domain is secured and static, www.sdchildrenandnature.org.
- SDCaN participants already identified content for connecting youth and families to outdoor nature programs, sharing resources within SDCaN, and articulating outdoor play and nature benefits

Ambassador Program. Goal 3-Partner with community groups.

Objective: Extend awareness of SDCaN messages to community organizations.

Methods:

- Create and implement a Children and Nature Ambassador program
- Recruit, train, schedule presentations for, and support ten Ambassadors
- Give at least 30 presentations to service clubs, professional associations (pediatricians), corporations, and other organizations with limited environment or outdoor experience
- Invite community or financial support for programs offered by SDCaN participants

Learning Workshops. Goal 5-Promote learning, sharing and networking.

Objective: Host four learning workshops for SDCaN participants.

Methods

- Select workshop topics from SDCaN interests, such as community-based social marketing, social networking, art and nature.
- Select instructors and location, for two-hour no-fee workshops
- Provide marketing, logistic support, and evaluation

Program Management and Evaluation. Goal 6-Build sustainable organization to support mission.

Objective: Supplement volunteer leadership to convene, facilitate, and evaluate.

Methods:

- Organize six bi-monthly SDCaN meetings and twelve Steering Committee meetings
- Support leaders, meetings, and projects of volunteer-based interest groups (Gardens, Schools, Families, Health, Communications)

Describe how your organization will measure the success of this program and/or any other considerations being taken into account.

Family Nature Clubs.

Objective: Establish five active clubs.

To meet this objective by the end of the grant, five active, geographically-diverse family nature clubs will be established in the San Diego region. Data will be gathered from family nature club documents (events calendar, sign-in sheets), interviews, surveys and census data. This objective will be met if data analysis reveals that each family nature club offers at least one nature activity bi-monthly, each attended by at least five families, and that family nature clubs are located in different areas of the region.

Nearby Nature School Field Trips.

Objective: To conduct field trips in five schools.

To meet this objective by the end of the grant, nature-based field trips will be conducted with at least five teachers in each school, resulting in 500 students attending an outdoor nature-related lesson. Data for this objective will be gathered from records of field trip attendance, and interviews with teachers and nature guides.

Website Redesign.

Objective: Design, create, and manage interactive website

To meet this objective by the end of the grant, the website will be redesigned to be interactive, offer nature resources within San Diego County, and include resources about the benefits of and activities for outdoor play and nature outings. Data will be gathered from number of website visits and a survey of users. This objective will be met if the website contains a list of nature resources within San Diego County, information about the benefits of outdoor play, and activities and approaches to explore the outdoors. It must also be interactive, allowing for contributions by SDCaN participants and the public. Usage statistics (e.g. number of visitors to the website per day) will also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the website in meeting our goals.

Ambassador Program.

Objective: Extend awareness of SDCaN messages to community organizations

To meet this objective by the end of the grant, the Ambassador program will be developed, 10 people trained as Ambassadors, and at least 30 presentations given to geographically- and interest-diverse organizations. Data will be gathered from program documents (training manual), location and number of presentations and attendance at each, and interests of community groups.

Learning Workshops.

Objective: Host four learning workshops for SDCaN members

To meet this objective by the end of the grant, an average of 20 individuals will have attended the four workshops. Data will be gathered from program documents, attendance records, and evaluations. Within six months of each workshop, a survey of attendees will ask about whether and how attendees have applied the workshop content to promote children and nature.

Program Management.

Objective: Supplement volunteer leadership to convene, facilitate, and expand SDCaN
To meet this objective by the end of the grant, six bi-monthly meetings will be attended by at least 30 participants per meeting and 12 monthly meetings held and attended by at least five members of the Steering Committee. Data will be gathered from program documents (attendance logs, meeting minutes).

Describe how this program will be promoted to the community/audience served and describe any outreach or communication methods that will be used to support this program.

SDCaN efforts to connect children to nature will reach the entire San Diego region by communicating with and strengthening the capacities and resources of many organizations that deliver children and nature programs to children, families, and the larger community. The program will apply **community-based social marketing** methods and tools to help create cultural and long-lasting behavior change for reconnecting children and nature.

For the **Family Nature Clubs**, information on safe, accessible nature places and resources to help families provide meaningful and fun activities while spending time outside in nature will be identified and/or developed. Once these resources are published on the SDCaN website, they will be actively promoted to family “meet-up” groups and other venues regularly visited by families, both online and at institutions and other public spaces (REI stores, etc.).

For the **Nearby Nature School Field Trips**, the program will meet at each site with the principal, classroom teachers, PTA representative, nearby “friends” group, and some children. Their expressed limitations, to taking field trips to nearby nature areas, will be discussed and addressed in the nature field trips developed for these five schools. Informational materials will be developed and distributed to parents, and lessons learned from program evaluations will be applied to nearby nature field trips at other schools.

For the **Website Redesign**, project leaders will consult with a cross-section of SDCaN participants regarding their expectations of content and functionality, including barriers that limit their effective use of other websites. The website will serve the entire San Diego region by making information easily available (likely tied to zip code) about nature programs and outings for children and families, and will also serve SDCaN participants as their places and programs will become better known and attended.

For the **Ambassador Program**, the communications methods will be a Powerpoint presentation and walks or meetings in nature. Outreach content will build on research findings and other materials from the national C&NN, local nature places and activities, presentations that SDCaN participants already offer in the community, and feedback from audiences on the barriers that limit their activities in nature. Contacts will be generated from the SDCaN Steering Group and others, personal contacts will be made to schedule Ambassador presentations, and the results will contribute to a community mapping of interested and vested organizations (following the national CN&N “Organizing Guide”).

The **Learning Workshops** and **Program Management** will continue to build on the interests of SDCaN participants, notably through their suggestions about communications and resource needs, action plans generated in the volunteer-based interest groups, and representation of diverse interests on the Steering Group.

Prominent credits will be given to Sempra Energy on the website homepage, in Ambassador programs presented to community groups, information presented to start-up family nature clubs and nearby nature school field trips, and at learning workshops. Invitations will be extended to Sempra Energy employees to start a family nature club in their neighborhood or bring an Ambassador to community organizations they participate in.

Describe the population that will be served or reached.

Of course, children are the reason for the Children and Nature movement! The SDCaN actually serves three different populations:

- Children of all ages (from toddlers to youth), and their immediate and extended families
- Those who provide services to children, including schools, preschools and daycare, after-school programs, pediatricians, and more
- Those who provide nature education programs and outdoor experiences, and who manage natural places

The SDCaN intends to bring the Children and Nature movement to the entire San Diego region, reaching and serving individuals of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, and incomes. Yet many participating organizations are located in and/or focus on particular areas (such as San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy and Anza-Borrego Foundation) or target populations (OutdoorExplore! in after-school programs and “meet-up” groups for toddlers and parents).

Many families seek activities close to home, therefore efforts for the five **Family Nature Clubs** will be scattered throughout San Diego (North County, East County, etc.). Families are a target population because they have historically received little attention in the benefits of families spending time in nature, appropriate expectations and activities, and ways to address safety concerns. For **Nearby Nature School Field Trips**, project staff will work with school administrators to identify schools that reflect the diversity of schoolchildren, at least two with a predominance of Title 1-eligible children. For example, contacts already exist with Rose Canyon Friends Group and Spreckels Elementary, which has a Bilingual Magnet program and a very diverse group of children (50% Latino and high percentage low income).

Presentations by **Ambassadors** would be offered to organizations that are rural and suburban and downtown, and reflect the diversity of San Diego’s locations, business and professional interests, community groups, neighborhoods (range of ethnic backgrounds and incomes). Many have already been identified by SDCaN in “community mapping,” building on advice provided in the CN&N Organizing Guide. The **Learning Workshops** and **Program Management** will serve providers of children’s services and nature education, who are diverse professionals and volunteers. Three interns will be engaged in this project, who are preparing for careers relating to children and nature.

Will you be collaborating with other organizations? If so, please list these organizations, indicate whether or not each of these is a non-profit organization.

Children and Nature Network, www.childrenandnature.org (national, non-profit)

Community-based organizations in the education, child development, environment, government, health, science, and business sectors. SDCaN does not substitute for or compete with organizations who bring children to nature. It is a “collaborative” of organizations and individuals, who work together to achieve greater public awareness, school programs, community partnerships, and changes in attitudes, skills and behaviors about nature.

Individuals from more than 80 organizations have participated in these first seven months, including: [List not included]

Describe other funding sources or how this program will be sustained.

San Diego Audubon Society (SDAS) has made a commitment to invest a portion of general operating income to support and ensure the sustainability of SDCaN. SDAS staff that actively work on SDCaN collaborative projects include Executive Director Chris Redfern, and Education Coordinator Camille Armstrong, and their activities include strategic planning, meeting facilitation, funding research, donor cultivation, and grant writing. SDAS volunteers and board members also participate in SDCaN activities and offer nature activities through SDAS programs. A recent award from the Tippet Foundation provided start-up funding for some SDAS staff time.

Fund development activities include research on grant opportunities, using foundation directory resources and a comprehensive identification of funders that have provided financial support to other regional children and nature collaboratives. The SDAS Education Coordinator will attend the C&CN Grassroots Gathering in September 2009 in Keystone, Colorado and will focus her networking efforts on identifying strategies for program sustainability and funding sources. As the efforts and accomplishments of the SDCaN becomes more widely known through marketing and outreach efforts supported by this grant, we also expect to interest national foundations and corporations for sponsorship and general support. Other organizations participating in SDCaN continue to identify and suggest sources for financial support.

Finally, it is also important to note that while strategic planning, facilitation, and fund development have received essential support from paid staff at SDAS, the program activities and accomplishments of the SDCaN are largely made possible by enthusiastic and highly-experienced unpaid volunteers representing over 80 participating organizations.

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