



BILLIE deLA PENHA, "TODAY'S CHILDREN"

# OUR MOST NATURAL

BY DEBORAH BOONE

# RESOURCE

Natural resources and their protection and enhancement determine our quality of life.

Clean air and water, timber, fish, wildlife, viewshed, fertile fields, pristine forests and beaches — these are all the natural resources we live for and by. They provide our economic base from which we draw our salaries and wages, both directly and indirectly. The damage or loss of any one of these will impact our lives. Consequently, many of us volunteer long hours and several dollars working to protect these precious resources from exploitation by thoughtless users.

We rally around the Courthouse and Capitol steps, pledging our support to candidates for public office who promise to sponsor legislation that will protect our trees, rivers, oceans, fields and beaches from those who would rape and pillage them. We join organizations that lobby Congress and state legislatures to provide protection of the resources we rely on to put bread on our tables or entertain visitors and ourselves. Recently, we put the future of many on the line in the name of protection of some of these natural resources, pitting whole communities against each others, dividing others perhaps forever.

Yet, we are overlooking the most important natural resource of all in our enthusiasm to

protect these others. We allow the mistreatment, neglect and abuse of one of the most helpless of all when we fail to protect our children.

Our children. Not yours or mine but ours, as they all are. We are all responsible for the children. They are as vital to our survival as clean air and water, timber, fish, viewshed, fertile fields, pristine fields and beaches. Yet, when we see one of them being mistreated we look to the other direction because it's none of our business. We see them as belonging to someone else, like personal property, and our interference would be offending. This lack of involvement only sends the confirming message to the mistreated children that they are not worth protecting.

How many times have you seen an incident in a public place, such as a grocery store, that made you uncomfortable or even fear for a child's safety, but you did nothing for fear of 'interfering' into something that was not your business? Yet, when you saw someone littering the beach there was no stopping your tirade on their lack of sensitivity to the environment or pride in their state.

How is it that we justify the act of chaining people to trees to prevent them from being cut, or filing huge class-action suits against

corporations that have engaged in earth resource pollution, but not the simple act of stepping forward and interfering in another person's mistreatment of a child? We will literally move mountains to prevent the violation of an environmentally sensitive area, protecting it from development of any kind in some cases, while we will condone the emotional abuse of a child for years on end without so much as mentioning to the abuser the devastating effect on the child's self-esteem they have ensued.

This lack of custodianship for our most valuable of natural resources is resulting in the disintegration of our social fabric to the degree that we are producing, in many cases, the next generation of violent criminals.

It is a proven fact that as many as 95% of those incarcerated for violent crimes are victims of child abuse. Abuse that could have been prevented in many instances simply by providing the same kind of preventive action we have given in other areas. By preventing child abuse we can make a major impact on topping violent crime, thus making an even more major impact on solving the problem of overcrowding in our prisons. This, in turn, will save an enormous amount of money spent on the support of prisoners, estimated to be approximately \$30,000 per year for each prisoner. This amount does not include the costs of counseling, foster care, etc., early on in the cycle of abuse. It also does not take into account the costs associated with the victims of violent crimes.

This is by no means intended to be a simplistic dissertation on the solution of an extremely complex issue. The most difficult part of child abuse prevention programs is in proving they can work. We are a society of people who believe that "if it ain't broke, why fix it?" We have a system that requires several fatalities to occur before a change is made; a system that operates on the premise that believes in treatment after-the-fact rather than prevention before-the-fact.

We are seeing some welcome changes in the area of health care along the lines of prevention. These changes are bringing down the costs in many cases; giving new meaning to the old adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Why not use this example of cost-saving to help solve a seriously out-of-control social problem while providing the protection of our most precious resource... children? We could fund Parent Education Programs at a fraction of the cost of intensive counseling and other treatment-oriented remedies. By providing early education in the areas of parenting, family dynamics, child development, etc., we could help prevent the cycle of child abuse from beginning, and we could also as a result help stop it from graduating to the next generation.

This year we celebrated twenty years since the first Earth Day, focusing on the natural resources and their protection. Perhaps children should be officially added to the list of natural resources to be protected and enhanced.

Deborah Boone has worked in the area of child abuse prevention since 1979 when she joined Jean McCall Babson and others in forming the Oregon Chapter: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse. She helped in the effort to persuade the Oregon Legislature to establish the Children's Trust Fund, also a tax form check-off program, which provides funding for programs statewide dedicated to primary prevention. A resident of Seaside, she is a former Clatsop County Commissioner and is a Democratic candidate for State Representative for the Second District.

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