Too many students today are not receiving enough outdoor experience. Their classes are so focused on technology and fitting in the state’s curriculum that the teachers forget that the children do not know about the natural world. They are growing up with the “me, me, me” mindset and not learning about the connection they—and all they do—has with the world. By taking students outdoors, a curiosity is peaked about how things work and what they have to do with where the child lives.

Even in the city, a child can go out and explore their surroundings. They can take a walk to a park or even just circle around a patch of grass between the school building and the parking lot. Nature occurs everywhere…not just in areas seemingly untouched by humans. It is just as important for a child to be able to see the small creatures in a schoolyard as it is for them to see a deer or fox in a forest. Taking a child out with a magnifying glass or a bug viewing box can allow them to explore the area and see examples of the life that are connected to where they live.

A child who has never had the experience of going to a lake or a stream is not likely to become a marine biologist. Nor would that same child care deeply about the effects of throwing trash into a storm drain. Children need environmental education experiences to know how what they do affects the world around them. They need to learn about why it is important that they take control of their world and how they can do their part to help save the planet. Even if the child does not actively take part in something now, he or she will have the know-how to make changes in the future.

Adding outdoor education into a science curriculum is essential. It will allow students to learn about the cycles of the Earth and living things, and then go outside to observe them. They will use inquiry to further their exploration and reach a point at which they will want to continue these inquisitions into their everyday lives. It is imperative that students acknowledge how the things humans do affect the ecosystems they live in. Every child deserves to have these experiences…not just spending their time learning from a textbook or videos.

This spring, I took my fourth grade classes on the Great Lakes Education Program. This field trip, organized by the Michigan Sea Grant, exemplifies environmental education in an outdoor setting. Students spent half a day cruising the Detroit River and collecting data from stops along the river. They checked water quality, studied benthic invertebrates, analyzed and collected weather data, and just enjoyed learning in an outdoor classroom. Nearly 75% of these students had never been on a boat before. Without this experience, the river was just a body of water they saw from downtown or a family trip to Bell Isle. They had no idea what lived in the water or how to tell if the river ecosystem was healthy. Sure, they could learn these things from a book, but with the actual experience of being on the water and doing these hands-on investigations, they will remember it forever. Outdoor and environmental education for our students—no matter where they are from—is essential to the future decisions our children will be responsible for making. They need these experiences to know how important our environment is.