

I am writing this letter because of my concern that Mr. Bones Pumpkin Patch is no longer able to have its pony ride and petting zoo. When Lyra Marble, the owner of Mr. Bones told me the news, she was devastated. She felt that the "heart" of the pumpkin patch had been ripped out. I understand her deep concern, because being a psychologist and working with Lyra on the pumpkin patch for many years, I am keenly aware of the importance of the animal experience for the young children who visit Mr. Bones.

Mr. Bones has been more than a business. It is not an amusement park for children. It has been a way to connect city children to a piece of a rural world they have never known. Education is more than just a classroom experience. Kids today spend an average of six and a half hours plugged into electronic media. Long time educators have noted the resulting neurobiological differences in children today. "They are great at responding - like what you do to a video screen. But I am not finding them very creative or constructive. They are not constructing their world, they are responding to it." The federal government is attempting to address this problem with the "No Child Left Inside Act". In testifying to the Environmental Subcommittee of the House of Representatives, Richard Louv, the author of "Last Child in the Woods" said "... there are risks in raising children under virtual protective house arrest: threats to their independent judgment and value of place, to their ability to feel awe and wonder, to their sense of stewardship for the Earth - and, most immediately, threats to their psychological and physical health".

I was amazed during the years that I worked on the pumpkin patch and met with the many groups of school children that would visit the patch as a school outing, how not only children, but some adults as well, are very ignorant of the natural world. They think that their food comes from super markets and restaurants. They don't realize that pumpkins are vegetables that grow from the ground, on vines, and that they not only can be used for jack-o-lanterns, but can be eaten as food. Most of these children have never been exposed to animals other than dogs and cats, other than through electronic media or books. For these children, it is an experience of a lifetime to touch a lamb, feed a goat, interact with living beings totally different than those in their known, familiar world. It is an experience that delights, creates wonder and awe. It's a unique learning experience - something no Disneyland or amusement park, or even school can give them. It's an experience that touches them on the deepest level, and one that stays with them for life.

All children love small animals. They see them in the movies and TV shows that they watch, the books that are read to them. BUT on the pumpkin patch the child learns that they are real. They interact with those animals that have until then only been products of imagination. Learning to relate with small farm animals gives children a unique lesson in socialization - learning

to relate to different species of life. This is a valuable lesson to be taught to young children. The child's experience is truly one of awe and wonder. It was a joy to witness this experience for these young children over the years - to see them touched so deeply. City children seldom get this kind of vital lesson, and it's no wonder that the pumpkin patch is so special for them.

There is an emerging field within academia of the study of human and animal relationships. Much of the research has focused on the therapeutic relationship between humans and dogs, but increasingly research is being done that substantiates the positive psychological effects of the interrelationship of children and farm animals, as well. Whole therapeutic communities are being modeled around a farm experience. These programs have found that giving children the opportunity/experience of living and working with farm animals, offers these psychologically damaged children a more therapeutic and healing experience than any medication ever could. An animal can touch a child's soul - medication does not. Some of the most "psychologically damaged" children that I have met on the pumpkin patch over the years have found a healing outlet through the connection with animals that was first introduced to them on the pumpkin patch. They would come and help feed and care for the animals during the three October weeks that the animals would be in their neighborhood. Some even formed bonds with the people from Lancaster County who brought the animals to LA and continued the relationship throughout the year. This relationship developed because of the child's emotional need. One that wasn't met within their own community. I believe that these children grew into healthier adults because of the relationships that they developed with the animals.

Few Los Angeles area children ever have the opportunity to experience a small family farm, to learn about how their food is grown, to interact with animals other than cats and dogs. This kind of experience for a young child can have lasting psychological and sociological effects. To quote S.J. Gould : "We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well - for we will not fight to save what we do not love." How can one recognize that we are totally and utterly dependent and part of the natural world without having an experience that emotionally connects us to that world. I believe that the petting zoo helps create a bond to the larger natural world for young children.

In a community such as West Hollywood, that values diversity, values families, claims to value environmental sustainability and the natural world, I am surprised that it isn't recognized how a children's petting zoo helps foster all these values in young children. Education is much more than a classroom experience. It isn't possible to take thousands of LA school children to a small family farm, but it is possible for them to touch a small piece of it,

on a pumpkin patch.

Please, for the present joy, and for future emotional and psychological health, return to the children of West Hollywood and Los Angeles the experience of wonder and awe that a four year old has when meeting a goat or a lamb. Please allow the pumpkin patch to have a petting zoo - please give the pumpkin patch back it's heart.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Campbell, Pres. NHRT, MS  
Native Habitat Restoration Trust