

Increasingly, children's books are where the wild things aren't: study

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Was your favorite childhood book crawling with wild animals and set in places like jungles or deep forests? Or did it take place inside a house or in a city, with few if any untamed creatures in sight?

A new study has found that over the last several decades, nature has increasingly taken a back seat in award-winning children's picture books -- and suggests this sobering trend is consistent with a growing isolation from the natural world.

A group of researchers led by University of Nebraska-Lincoln sociology professor emeritus J. Allen Williams Jr. reviewed the winners and honor books receiving the prestigious Caldecott Medal from the award's inception in 1938 through 2008. In total, they examined nearly 8,100 images contained in nearly 300 books. Caldecott awardees are the children's books judged by the American Library Association to have the best illustrations in a given year.

Researchers looked at whether images depicted a natural environment, such as a jungle or a forest; a built environment, such as a house, a school or an office; or something in-between, such as a mowed lawn. They also noted whether any animals were in the pictures -- and if so, if those creatures were wild, domesticated or took on human qualities.

Their results, Williams said, visibly exhibited a steady decline in illustrations of natural environments and animals, as well as humans' interactions with both. Meanwhile, images of built environments became

much more common.

"I am concerned that this lack of contact may result in caring less about the natural world, less empathy for what is happening to other species and less understanding of many significant [environmental problems](#)," Williams said.

Overall, built environments were depicted in 58 percent of the images and were the major environment 45 percent of the time, while natural environments were present in 46 percent of the images and were the major environment 32 percent of the time. But recent trend lines were discouraging: Latter decades showed an obvious shift away from nature -- while built and natural environments were almost equally likely to be shown from the late 1930s until the 1960s, cities and towns and the indoors started to increase in books in the mid-1970s while fewer and fewer books pictured the natural environment.

During the seven decades included in the study, more people have lived in and around built environments, so researchers said they were not surprised such images would be prominent. But "what we find in these books ... is not a consistent proportional balance of built and natural environments, but a significant and steady increase of built environments," the authors wrote. "Natural environments have all but disappeared."

While the study was limited to Caldecott awardees, researchers said the findings are important because the award leads to strong sales and the honorees are featured in schools and libraries. Caldecott winners also can influence tastes for children's literature more generally.

The study does not say that increasing isolation from the natural world influenced the content trends, but it does hint that the steady increase in built environments and the simultaneous decline in [natural environments](#)

and [wild animals](#) are consistent with that isolation.

"This does not mean, of course, that environmentalism is not an important part of American culture, but it does suggest that the current generation of young children listening to the stories and looking at the images in children's [books](#) are not being socialized, at least through this source, toward greater understanding and appreciation of the [natural world](#) and the place of humans within it," the authors wrote.

The study's findings are published in the journal *Sociological Inquiry*.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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