When my children were very young, I usually had to call them over to show them what and how to observe. But these days my teenage daughters are often the first to yell, “Come over here and see what I’ve found.”

Age has taken its toll on my sense of smell, sight, and sound, and the girls are in better physical condition, so they’re usually in front. But there’s something else that explains why I’m slower to notice things. I’m preoccupied with my work and simply not as receptive to my surroundings as I once was.

In a crowded room, it’s impressive to note our ability to focus on specific signals coming into our sense organs. It’s possible to engage in an intense discussion with a single person even though there is a background din of many other conversations. Youngsters amaze me with their claims of being able to concentrate on homework with the TV and stereo blaring.

An Alaskan fur trapper once visited New York City for the first time. Walking along Times Square, he remarked, “I hear a cricket.” His companion scoffed at the idea that a cricket could be heard amidst the cacophony of the city. The Alaskan took out a coin and flipped it into the air. Several passersby heard the coin land and glanced down to the spot, proving that we are sensitive to what we are conditioned to detect.

There is also a desensitizing phenomenon called *habituation*. When a sense organ is stimulated, it sends an electrical signal via neurons and it registers on our consciousness. But if the stimulus persists, the intensity of signals the neurons send to our brains gradually diminishes. Thus, a loud noise or sharp odour may be quite noticeable at first, but when it persists we aren’t as aware of it after a while.

Most of us are urban dwellers living in an environment awash with stimuli. Yet most of the time we are oblivious to sounds, odours or even activity taking place around us. We are so habituated that we hardly notice. Perhaps that explains the way a frightening problem like ozone depletion, global warming, or toxic pollution seems to become less urgent over time even though it hasn’t been dealt with.

Habituation and our ability to concentrate by screening out incoming information may protect us from being overwhelmed by the dimensions of the global *ecocrisis*. Our lives revolve around recognizing the latest hit song, TV or movie star, seeing a puck enter the net, or paying attention to Dow Jones averages. We are sensitive to clothing styles, cars, stores, and advertisements that dominate our physical surroundings.

If we were more sensitive to the condition of the planet’s physical features, like the air, climate, plants, or animals, we might be climbing the barricades to protest the fact that sunny days that were always a reason to celebrate now threaten us with cancer; Lake Ontario fish are no longer consumable; and ancient forests, wetlands, and prairies are disappearing at a horrifying rate.

In spite of my concerns for the state of the earth, I know I’ve also become insensitive to my surroundings. It takes a deliberate effort to shut off the filtering mechanisms of the “civilized” world in order to allow the senses to inform us about the state of our surroundings.

As our lives become increasingly dominated by the artifice of shopping malls and the electronic media, we need all the more the opportunity to experience the natural world. It is vital to plan nature into our urban surroundings, where most of us live and where today’s children will spend their entire lives. It’s time to re-discover the “real” world.
Directions: Answer the following questions about the text on page 33 and identify each QAR.

1. According to the author, what differences does he see between himself and his children?

   QAR: ________________________________

2. What other changes might people experience as they age?

   QAR: ________________________________

3. How does habituation affect people?

   QAR: ________________________________

4. Why does the author believe that desensitization to stimuli is a problem for humans?

   QAR: ________________________________
5. What are some of the dangers that our natural world is facing?

QAR: ________________________________

6. How do habituation and the ability to screen incoming information affect you? Give both positive and negative examples.

QAR: ________________________________

7. What would you do to alert people to the problem of habituation and the negative impact it is having on the “real” world?

QAR: ________________________________
Essay-Writing Tips, Part 1

- Before you start writing, identify the QAR.

- Create a short outline of your main thesis or idea and two or three main points that support your thesis. If you’re stuck, do some brainstorming.

- Restate the question as a thesis or opening line(s).

- Answer all parts of the question. Check off each part as you go.

- For each part of the answer, note the specific part in the text that supports it.

- Include an introduction, at least two body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

- Present your ideas in a logical way. What comes first, second, third? What is your conclusion?

- If you have time, reread your essay to correct spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors.
Directions: Reread the passage on page 33. David Suzuki states, “...we all need more opportunity to experience the natural world.” Write an essay discussing the pros and cons of this approach to dealing with global ecocrises.