

Arizona Trail Seeds of Stewardship Program

Walking Among the Ponderosas

by Kristen Widmark

It's an unseasonably warm November morning in the forest outside of Flagstaff, Arizona. Students are gathered in a circle beneath Ponderosa Pines learning the importance of humus from local environmentalist, John Taylor. "Hummus, when it's dropped on the ground," he says, "becomes humus." The group laughs.

The Seeds of Stewardship Program, a new youth outreach and education initiative of the Arizona Trail Association, has brought together nine Ponderosa High School students, one dedicated teacher, George Cadiente, and six community citizens for a day hike on the Arizona Trail near Buffalo Park.



As the program's title implies, the aim of this program is to plant seeds of stewardship in youth so the next generation will take an active role in the enjoyment, development, and protection of the Arizona National Scenic Trail, as well as other public lands throughout the state. Working on both ends of the state, the program staff has engaged several schools to schedule at least three outings each for their students.

This outing on November 29th is the inaugural event for the Seeds of Stewardship Program. The Arizona Trail Association has invited community professionals who embody the term "steward;" John Taylor of T-Bird Enterprises; Cassandra Roberts, Program Manager of Willow Bend Environmental Education Center; Matt Roberts, Director of American Conservation Experience; and Mark Loseth, Trails Trainer and Coordinator of American Conservation Experience. Matt Nelson and Kristen Widmark of the Arizona Trail Association are facilitating the event.

The outing is a true community effort with each professional donating his or her time and attention to the students and the hike. The staff at Ponderosa High School, a Flagstaff accommodation school that serves students who are at high risk for dropout, has given full support and enthusiasm to the program. Matt Roberts eagerly volunteered the ACE Vans as transportation for this event when he learned that the group needed a ride. And the students have volunteered their personal time to learn more about their local forest.

Strategic rests are taken during the 4.8-mile hike where each environmental professional speaks about his or her profession, the local forest, and the importance of stewardship. The atmosphere is easy and relaxed as questions and answers are bounced around the circle.

The students are also engaged in experiential activities including a sound map exercise in which they sit silently and map the sounds of nature that surround them.

In another activity, the students are asked to write post cards to Tucson area students who are participating in the Seeds of Stewardship Program. One student writes: *The forest here is very serene and peaceful. A great place to hike, bike or run. What's your forest like?*

This is the first of many meaningful outings for Arizona's youth, encouraging them to connect with the incredible natural resources that exist in their own backyard along the Arizona Trail.

