

## Arizona Trail Seeds of Stewardship Program

*Hiking with All of Our Senses*

by Matthew J. Nelson

On Friday, April 5, fourteen 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students from Miami Junior High School participated in their first Seeds of Stewardship outing. Although it's a short drive from Miami to the Picketpost Trailhead, only one of the students had ever been there before. Along with 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher Rayla Mills, trail guide Conor, teacher's aide Katie, and Executive Director Matt Nelson, the students explored the colorful desert along Passage 17 (Alamo Canyon) of the Arizona National Scenic Trail



The hillsides were exploding with yellow brittlebush flowers, magenta hedgehog cactus blooms, and the brilliant orange petals of mariposa lilies. Students hike along, learning about different members of the biotic community and observing birds high in the sky. The trail was lined with peppergrass (*Lepidium virginicum*), and we paused to taste test this seasonal herbaceous plant. Each student placed a stem from the plant in their mouth, stripped the pungent seeds off with their teeth, and let out a collective verbal response to the taste – similar to that of a radish. “It tastes like wasabi!” was one comment from a 7<sup>th</sup> grader.

Later in the hike, someone discovered bright orange berries hanging from the wolfberry (*Lycium excertum*) bush. Although the tart, tomato-like fruits weren't as popular as the peppergrass, it started a beneficial conversation about ethnobotany – the study of how people use plants. Students learned a little bit about the over 300 edible and medicinal plants found in their own backyard.



Walking along the singletrack through the lush desert environment, students and leaders eventually found their way to a major *arroyo* (Alamo Wash) where they found shade beneath giant mesquite trees. They wrote in their nature journals – provided by the ATA as part of the ongoing program – about their trail experience through sensory awareness: “I see...I hear...I smell...I taste...I feel...” They were also encouraged to spend time drawing in detail at least one desert plant that they connect with sometime between lunch and the end of the day. Saguaros and mariposa lilies were among the most popular subjects for the young artists.

Students practiced balancing rocks in the arroyo, then hiked along the rocky drainage for a short distance. They discovered Sahara mustard (*Brassica tournefortii*) and learned about invasive species in Arizona. Everyone was excited about the idea of returning to pull out the plant before it goes to seed and takes over the desert.



A cool desert breeze seemed to follow the students as they made their way down the trail and back toward the trailhead. After hiking for four miles and getting to know their own backyard a little bit better, each student was proud of their accomplishment, grateful for the interesting things learned along the way, and excited about the opportunity to do it again in the near future.

Two more outings are planned with Miami Junior High School this spring. These outings are made possible by generous donations from Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI) and Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold Foundation.

