

Arizona Trail Seeds of Stewardship Program

Having Fun, Working Hard and Caring for the Land
by Kristen Widmark

May 2 and 3 was a celebration of hard work and hands-on education in Northern Arizona when sixty-three 7th graders from Northland Preparatory Academy in Flagstaff spent two days building trail drainages and gaining knowledge about their local environment from Coconino National Forest Rangers, Coconino Rural Environment Corp (CREC) members, teachers, and the ATA's Northern Arizona Educational Outreach Coordinator.



The event took place on the Arizona Trail just north of Walnut Canyon. Each day started with four hours of manual labor. Students worked in small teams to create and reestablish trail drainages. Students learned how to use tools such as the Pulaski, PickAx and McLeod as they dug trenches and built berms.

Students also thought critically about the science of trail building as well as the natural flow of water and its effects on trails. It made for practical learning about engineering and design.

A team of four Coconino National Forest Rangers, led by Sean Murphy, and CREC members were present to safely facilitate each group's trail building efforts and to teach the students about their respective careers in the outdoors.

As the students moved rocks and dug into the soil, many natural habitats were exposed. Students wondered at termite populations, earth worms and grubs. Rangers talked about the need to disturb as little habitat as possible. They also pointed out that humans are part of the ecosystem and have historically been predators. To that end, some students were brave enough to taste the little white grubs they found wriggling in the soil.



After lunch each day, Rangers led students on an educational walkabout. They were shown an historic field house and potsherds, most likely left behind by the Sinagua that occupied Walnut Canyon nearly 1,000 years ago. The students learned about Flagstaff's history of logging through observing old tree stumps. They were also taught about fire ecology and different life zones. Rangers pointed out cryptobiotic soil, noting its importance for watersheds as well as forest health.



To demonstrate the importance of leaving a light footprint, students were taken to a place in the earth that had been deeply scarred by a mud-bogging truck. Students were encouraged to think of the long-term damage done by the careless driver.

At the end of each day, the adults present commented on the hard work and full attention given by these students. The students learned a bit about themselves, the forest and the Arizona Trail with eager attitudes. When asked if they had any final questions at the end of the event, one student raised his hand to ask, "can we come back?"



These outings are made possible by grants from Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI) and Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold Foundation, and from the generous support of the Coconino National Forest and Coconino Rural Environment Corps.

