

Arizona Trail Seeds of Stewardship Program

A Wilderness Experience

by Deborah Oslik



On the first weekend of May, our program led its' first group of teens into the Santa Catalina Mountains for an overnight camping trip. We headed up Catalina Highway with three Pima Partnership High School students, one teacher, and two Seeds of Stewardship leaders. The focus of our trip was to provide a safe, fun, and positive outdoor experience for inner-city youth along the Arizona Trail.

We left directly after school on a Friday afternoon and drove to General Hitchcock campground, which is situated in bear country. Our first evening was spent getting oriented to group living and our new outdoor home for the next couple of days. Students learned to set up their own tents, cooked dinner together, and made a campfire. For some students it was their first night ever sleeping outside, and for others it was their first campfire s'more! To get our fire started that evening, we did a "fire-off" challenge. The group was split in half and each designated their own campfire ring. There was a piece of cordage tied above each fire ring about 18 inches above the ground. The challenge was to see which group could build a fire fast enough to burn through the string first. To add to the challenge, each group was only provided three matches, and it was pitch dark. Although one group took the prize, the other burned through their cordage moments later to also achieve victory. The evening ended with a short stroll out to a clearing where one of the instructors, an ecology and evolutionary biology specialist, did a mini-astronomy lesson using a laser pointer to identify the constellations.

Although only 30 miles from Tucson, the next morning we awoke in the pines and felt much further away. We spent the morning get geared up for our overnight backpacking trip into Sabino Canyon. After loading our packs and reviewing our route, we got in the vans and shuttled down to our trailhead at Gordon Hirabayashi. This trip was full of firsts for our students, including putting on a heavy backpack that held everything they needed to survive and travel in the backcountry for the next 24 hours. Although packs were big,



students were positive and excited to head out. We hit the trail and traveled about four miles down the trail. With many challenges that day, including hot temperatures, blisters, and the first time backpacking for everyone, our four miles took many hours to travel. A fun activity we did to create a feeling of cohesion and investment in what we were doing was to

create “trail names” for everyone in the group. Some of the names included *Kung Fu Panda*, *Red Feather*, and *Tigris*. As hours went by, our regular names drifted away and we became our trail names.

We hoped to end the day at Hutch’s Pools, a popular swimming hole, but alas, our day was too long to make it. This was a difficult moment to accept that we would not be making it to our planned destination, but it was quickly settled into once it meant no more hiking for the day. We set up camp in a little wash just above the East Fork of Sabino Canyon, where a small trickle of water, our water source, gurgled below. There we enjoyed a calm evening as we cooked a spaghetti dinner and slept under the stars.



After experiencing the difficulty of hiking through the heat of the day, the students were determined to wake up by sunrise and begin hiking as soon as possible. On the morning of our hike out, they were fast and motivated to not get stuck in the heat, and to get back to civilization. When all was said and done, each of the students felt a great sense of accomplishment. They each had the opportunity to step completely out of their comfort zone and into an experience that was challenging, positive, and growth-

oriented. They all said they would do it all over again!



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