

Following Ancient Footsteps into the Coyote Mountains
by Matthew J. Nelson

On February 20, I led a group of 11 enthusiastic and adventurous high schoolers to the Coyote Mountains Wilderness west of Tucson. Although just a short drive from where they attend school at Pima Partnership downtown, none of them had ever heard of the Coyote Mountains before. After bouncing down a dirt road for 30 minutes we arrived at a corral on the King Anvil Ranch and began our hike.



The flat two-mile walk along an old ranch road allowed the students to walk, talk, and enjoy each other's company outside their regular school and inner city environment. It allowed all of us an opportunity to look, listen, and get in touch with our surroundings. Our group was an eclectic cultural mix of backgrounds; most were Hispanic/Latino, one African-American and one student's whose family recently emigrated from Afghanistan. The school's teacher and I were the only Caucasians.



Since the Coyote Mountains are within an archaeological district, the ground is covered with cultural resources. Occasionally, I pointed out random pieces of flaked stone, but it wasn't until I discovered a hammerstone and a wooden awl that I was able to talk more in-depth about flint knapping, and the process by which native people turned brittle rock into scrapers, knives and projectile points. Once alerted to the fact the ground was full of history, students' eyes began to scan the ground for remnants of Hohokam culture instead of looking toward the mountains in the distance. We identified decorated ceramics

as well as flakes of chert, fine-grain basalt and obsidian.

Seeing and touching artifacts was an awesome experience for them all, and led to a great discussion about the importance of protecting cultural resources and why it's vital to leave what you find. I explained the state and federal laws that protect these resources, and more importantly, the ethics that surround protecting artifacts for future generations. Students were especially impressed by the large bedrock mortars we found along the way, made smooth by



generations of people grinding and processing seeds in this very place.

After crossing over a stone dam where a small amount of water could be found, we walked along a primitive path and crossed a barbed wire fence into the Coyote Mountains Wilderness. Wild hyacinth was showing its beautiful purple flowers in the rock crevices, which led to a great discussion about edible and medicinal plants of the Sonoran Desert. The discovery of mesquite sap dripping from branches allowed anyone willing to sample nature's "candy," although few could stand the taste longer than a few seconds.

Once inside the designated wilderness area we followed the main drainage of Mendoza Canyon until we found a large granite slab where we could enjoy lunch together. The topic of conversation during lunch was wilderness. With the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act just around the corner, it was an opportunity to share with these inner city and "at-risk" youth the importance of wilderness, why it is there, and what it means for them. The afternoon ended with 10 minutes of silence on the granite slabs of Mendoza Canyon.



On the hike back, students watched red tail hawks soar high above the desert. We gazed at petroglyphs pecked into the granite boulders and talked about what life might have been like in this place 800 years ago. Few people visit the Coyote Mountains Wilderness each year, and I doubt more than a handful of inner city kids will ever hike into Mendoza Canyon. But for our group, it was a meaningful and educational outing they'll never forget.

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