



Picture Canyon: A Wilderness Experience in the Heart of the City by Sabrina Carlson

On December 15th, 2014 a group of 56 sixth grade students, 2 teachers, and 6 parents from Mount Elden Middle School, set out to explore Picture Canyon and the Arizona Trail in Flagstaff. This enthusiastic group of learners walked along the Tom Moody

Trail beside the Rio de Flag where they met with representatives of the Wildcat Hill Wastewater Treatment Facility. The students learned about how this plant processes and cleans wastewater from the city and distributes part of the reclaimed water to golf courses, schools and parks for irrigation and part of the water into the Rio de Flag. They discussed the Rio diversion project of the early 2000's which was integral to reducing flooding during spring run-off, protecting nearby properties, and allowing greater economic development in nearby floodplain areas. Just as exciting, thanks to water input from the treatment plant the Rio was transformed from an intermittent stream with occasional severe flooding into a perennial stream that provides crucial riparian habitat.

Further downstream, classroom teachers led students in a lesson about public vs. private land designation and usage. This topic was well placed at this location, as the Picture Canyon area was purchased in 2012 by the City of Flagstaff and designated as "Picture Canyon Preserve and Archaeological Park to protect its beauty, recreational opportunities, and archeological significance for city residents and its visitors in perpetuity.

The last stop on their formal learning journey was a visit to the waterfall on the Rio, just downstream from the treatment plant. The students observed firsthand the increased velocity of water flow with increased gradient. I had the pleasure of guiding them through an activity in which they acted out the difference between a rainstorm on a barren hillside vs. one covered with vegetation. In our lively discussions before the activity, students made predictions about what they thought would happen and defended their predictions with evidence. After acting out the scenarios, we debriefed about what happened and discussed why their predictions were supported or not supported.



After our lessons, the students gathered in a sunny field for lunch. We then continued down the Tom Moody Trail to the intersection with the Elden Mountain Passage of the Arizona Trail. We hiked northwest on the trail toward a bridge over the Rio. There we stopped amid tall ponderosas and golden grasses for a few moments of quiet and to reflect on the tremendous blessing of this beautiful natural resource within our city. Students had a chance to observe ducks and other waterfowl and watch the changing vegetation as we walked downstream from the water treatment plant.

After some more walking up the canyon we finished our loop on the Pipeline Trail where students observed people working on an exposed section of the natural gas pipeline that crosses the United States.

They day was chilly but sunny and incredibly beautiful for this fantastic group of youth.



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