



An Extrasensory Experience Along the Arizona Trail

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz

On December 16 the Arizona Trail Association led 10 students from Mansfeld Middle School out to hike on the Arizona Trail from the Gabe Zimmerman Trailhead. Before we started our hike we gave the students the opportunity to share their experience and memories of the 2011 shooting, and although they are only in 7th grade a few of them had memories of the event that they shared with their classmates.



Mansfeld Middle School students and teachers pose for a photo with Gabe Zimmerman's memorial before their hike on the AZT.

We then began to hike south observing many different species of cactus as we moved along. Students were enthusiastic to be out, many taking initiative to find the trail and keep the group together. The trail showed evidence of the recent rain, as did the ocotillo, which we stopped to admire at various points during the hike. The creosote was also pungent and all the students stopped to enjoy the fragrance. A few agaves had flowered and their stalks lay near the trail, a good opportunity to talk about the life cycle of these plants and the inaccuracy of their nickname "century plant."



Learning about erosion and sediment while walking in Davidson Canyon.

We decided to loop back though the wash, which gave everyone the opportunity to see a different side of the desert, and observe the layers of sediment and erosion patterns. Alex and Esteban observed that the plants in the wash had all been pulled in one direction and determined the direction that the water flowed from their observation.

We all took a moment of silence by the exposed roots of some overhanging mesquites to enjoy the quiet around us. After making our loop we stopped for lunch near Cienega Creek. The youth noticed the smell of the cottonwood leaves decomposing in the water and began fishing them out to see their skeletons.



Examining the vascular structure of cottonwood tree leaves.

After lunch used our Field Journals to record observations about our day and what we had seen, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted. The students all had one or two concrete examples to write down, most choosing to make note of the memorable creosote. Esteban and Erika began picking up the cottonwood leaves to trace in their journals, so we took the opportunity to have them observe more closely their surroundings with a free drawing exercise.



Nature Journals encourage students to observe, record and reflect on their experiences.

At first the drawings were more symbols of generic trees and the ground, but some found through looking longer and more closely that they could actually represent the uniqueness of the cottonwood tree branches in their many directions and their deciduous shedding of foliage. Azul and Eliana were particularly proud of their drawings of the scene.

After lunch we had ample opportunity to revisit our Leave No Trace Ethics because two of the students abandoned their granola bar wrappers and a few other wrappers in their lunch spot. It was the perfect way to facilitate more discussion about stewardship and responsibility. As we walked out of the *ciénega*, Mrs. Bittel, our school liaison, pointed out where some of last year's Mansfeld students had helped with trail maintenance. It was the perfect way to complete our circuit on the Arizona Trail.



Students enjoy lunch near Cienega Creek, a vital riparian zone along the Arizona Trail.

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