

Reflections and Observations Along the Arizona Trail

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



On January 28, 8 students from City High School adventured out on the Arizona Trail, beginning at the Gabe Zimmerman Trailhead and making their way in a loop back to the Cienega Creek Natural Preserve. It was a beautiful winter day, and one of the main educational goals of the outing was to explore the riparian zone within Cienega Creek. One of the more notable differences between the riparian area and the rest of the desert trail that was immediately observable to the students was the dramatic seasonal changes visible in the cottonwood and ash trees.

Students were given the task of observing sights and sounds of flora and fauna while hiking. We noted raptors flying, small birds chirping, and spent time observing a large black widow spider that emerged from an abandoned backpack. The students hiked first along the ridgeline and then down into the sandy wash, getting a sense of the different life zones that can exist within a short distance.



City High School students hike along the Arizona Trail south of the Gabe Zimmerman Trailhead.

This group is now well acquainted with Leave No Trace (LNT) ethics and are preparing to engage in stewardship activities for their future hikes. They were quite dismayed to find evidence of manmade waste in the wash and riparian zone. A rusting car, abandoned in Davidson Canyon, and a backpack that was speculated to have belonged to a migrant, were some of these examples. It was an opportunity to delve into a discussion about who else might be walking parts of the Arizona Trail, as well as who has exposure and the opportunity to engage with LNT ethics and who does not.

We enjoyed lunch down by the creek and discussed the differences between the riparian area and the rest of the trail, noting the various plant adaptations depending on availability of water.



Students explored both routes to enjoy a big loop through two very different ecosystems.

Near the end of our hike students were asked to participate in a vivid reflection activity by holding a rock they had found and sharing a thought or memory that came to them during the quiet parts of the hike. Some student shared they saw new things or were observing their surroundings. Others shared that they were glad to have the quiet time on the trail. One shared gratitude for healthy living opportunities like hiking as a way to avoid

making other choices as a teen. Another student shared that his ancestors might have walked this way for generations before, linking his own history and sense of self to the land he and his peers were now enjoying.

On the ride back to school everyone felt a sense of contentment, and that they had connected to their environment and learned from it that day on the Arizona Trail.



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