

Walden Grove's Premiere Arizona Trail Experience

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz

On February 20, a new group of students experienced the Arizona Trail, many for the first time. This was the Seeds of Stewardship's first outing with Walden Grove High School, located within the gateway community of Sahuarita. Thirteen junior and senior AP Biology Students came on this outing to the Gabe Zimmerman Trailhead. Many of them were exposed to new experiences, like creosote creating the "smell of rain," for the very first time.



Students from Walden Grove get ready to hit the trail.



A palo verde nurse tree benefits this saguaro cactus.

Before setting out we got to know each other, and the range of exposure of the outdoors, specifically discussing and sharing ideas about responsible trail behavior. Some knew about Leave No Trace ethics and some did not; others thought they did but were surprised to find out that even if something is biodegradable, you pack it out. One student, Justin, eagerly recited the Scout's code of honor for his peers.

Passage 7 of the Arizona Trail has received a lot of student visitation this season, and it's not without good reason: its beauty, accessibility and perennial water make it an ideal spot. This group moved quickly, but always took time to pause and soak in the treasures that this corner of the AZT has to offer. We observed the old and new ocotillo growth, the mutualism of a nurse plant relationship between a palo verde and a young saguaro; we saw different forms of scat and listened to bird song. Near where the trail crosses under the highway we crossed a small wash, an offshoot of the larger one that runs parallel to the trail. Rocks had been put in place, obviously by a maintenance crew to slow the flow of the water. Students don't always notice obvious human manipulation of a seemingly natural environment, and it's always interesting to point it out and ask their ideas about why things exist as they are. Chris, a high school senior with some experience in trail maintenance, shared with the rest of the group his knowledge about watersheds, ground water infiltration and aquifers – a great peer-taught lesson.

We moved slower once down in the wash, the group splitting into two, with some trudging in the sandy soft terrain. In order to make sure everyone had time to snack and rest we stopped and attempted a listening exercise. There were only a few windows of true silence as students seemed a little too giggly to really quiet down.



Activities that build trust and encourage the use of other senses are an important part of the Seeds of Stewardship experience.

As we finished our loop and prepared for lunch the students took turns donning blindfolds for the “Find your tree” exercise. The exercise is designed to foster trust and a different sensory approach to nature than is our default. A student allows a partner to lead them around blindfolded to a tree nearby, which they then touch and observe as thoroughly as possible without the use of their eyes. Then the partner circuitously guides them back to their original spot making the identification of the tree a little more complicated. Depending on the student, this blindfolded trek was everything from a nearly impossible challenge to something quite manageable...but everyone had a lot of fun.

We moved from our trees down to Cienega Creek for lunch. Bees buzzed at a low roar around the pollen-bearing branches of trees, tadpoles clung to rocks, and fish and other creatures were numerous in the shallows. After eating, it made the perfect spot to explore and finally reflect on the day. As a final activity everyone was asked to define the word stewardship. Desiree guessed that stewardship might mean protector. Amanda said, “Getting closer to nature, relying on yourself, not being materialistic, and having fun.”



Darion feeling his tree.

Darion said, “Stewardship means conservation of our surroundings and awareness of the environment and how we can respect nature and leave less of a footprint so one day when other people come they can experience it the same way we did.”



Journaling near the riparian oasis of Cienega Creek.

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