Stewardship in Action with Santa Rita High School's Conservation Club
by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz

On May 15, 2015 six students from the Santa Rita High School Conservation Club participated in their final Seeds of Stewardship outing of the school year. We met Mark Flint from Pima County Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation off the Old Sonoita Highway. We were there to work on a segment of the Arizona Trail that intersects with the road. The group of high school freshmen and sophomores got an introduction to tool use and tool safety before they followed Mark to the work site. He explained how erosion damages the trail, and talked about where there was need for a few new drainage trenches.

Mr. Ruddick and the Santa Rita High School Conservation Club pose for a photo after a day of trail work.

Ethan, a high school freshman, had not been so convinced about trail work during the tool presentation, but he was the first to change his mind. "This is so much fun!" he told me as I went to check out the trench he and Jared were clearing out with pick mattocks. They were so proud they asked me take their picture.

There was a lot to accomplish, but we had many hands on board. Biology teacher Josh Ruddick worked along side his students, as did the Executive Director of the Arizona Trail Association, Matt Nelson, whose enthusiasm was contagious.

Digging a trench to help manage erosion.

They worked hard in the cool and cloudy May morning, positively impacting about a quarter-mile of trail. Mark Flint showed students how to alter the path of the adjoining trail to better manage water flows. Ethan and Jared took turns uncovering and uprooting a stubborn whitethorn acacia that was in the middle of the new trail. The other group worked hard down the trail, where they had some serious trenching and rock removal to do. As they were working two friendly mountain bikers passed through, a good reminder to the students of all of the different kinds of uses of the trail. By the time we took a break for snacks after a few hours of labor, we had transformed our stretch of trail.

Matt and Mark thanked the students for their hard work on behalf of all the users of the Arizona Trail, and bid them farewell. The rest of us loaded up the tools and headed to the Gabe Zimmerman Trailhead. We still had phenology data to collect for the National Phenology Network (NPN).

Cienega Creek wasn't flowing very strongly, but the leafy willows and cottonwoods took the students by surprise. "I feel like I'm somewhere else, I didn't know Tucson could look this green!" said Jessica. All the students echoed this refrain as they explored the creek bed.

We had lunch, and then it was time to choose the plant they wanted to monitor an input data for. Students took GPS units loaned to us by the NPN and set off in pairs, making notes about plant location, and the presence of defining characteristics like leaves, flowers, or fruit.

Exploring Cienega Creek

Sarah and Brendan record their plant with a GPS.

After that was done we let them explore before having a final closing ceremony were they wrote down and then shared what stewardship means to them now. Sarah wrote, "I do consider myself a steward. Now that I know what it takes to keep trails clear and to leave nothing but my footprints and take nothing but my memories I feel that I'll pay more attention to what's around me and take better care of everything with what I've learned."

Jared wrote, "Stewardship to me means helping when you can and doing your part to keep cool places like Cienega Creek clean and natural."

Chris wrote, "Stewardship now means to me that we all can become a caring person to nature and that to conserve it takes work."

Each student received an Arizona Trail bandana as a thank you for his or her participation in Seeds of Stewardship. We said goodbye knowing that we'll be seeing each other next fall, and with plans to return to Cienega Creek to check on the plants we began monitoring with the NPN.

This Seeds of Stewardship outing made possible by a grant of funds from:

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