

## Saguaro Surveys with EDGE High School

by Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz



On November 18, 13 students from EDGE Charter High School attended their second outing with Seeds of Stewardship. We went to Saguaro National Park-West to assist with their Saguaro Surveys. The Secretary of the Interior also planned a visit this same day, so we arrived amidst what could be considered a hullabaloo for a National Park. We were quickly whisked away from the crowded parking area, and into the *arroyo*, which would serve as a desert highway with direct access to our saguaro plots. In the sandy drainage, Ranger Chip Littlefield who is in charge of park education and outreach, ducked away from the Secretary's visit to join us. Perhaps due to the special occasion, park rangers whipped us up hot chocolate on gas stoves as we sat and had an introductory conversation.



**Ranger Chip prepares students for their important task of helping Saguaro National Park document their namesake species.**

Chip addressed the students with frankness and respect. He told that what was most important to him about their experience in the park was not the data they were about to collect, but that they left having been impacted by what they saw and did. He asked them to consider that the park was giving them a chance to try on, for the morning, what it is like to be a scientist, but that ultimately education should be a means to greater opportunities and choice in shaping their own futures.

After we split into three groups, the first task at hand was finding the "exit" from the wash into the survey plot. The simultaneous task for the students was learning how to use and read the GPS units that would lead us to all five of the saguaros that we were going to survey. In my group of students, Jose and TJ stepped up as the navigators. They went from clumsily finding their way with false starts and stops, to wielding the GPS units with great accuracy and efficiency in a matter of minutes. The rest of the process became similarly streamlined as the student survey team fell into a rhythm and became acquainted with the different jobs. We treaded carefully in our plot, being cautious not to disrupt the many animal burrows underfoot as well as looking for chain fruit cholla segments looking to hitch a ride to an opportune spot to grow a new plant.



**Let the surveys begin!**

The rangers explained to the students how cholla propagates by cloning. I invited them to imagine if they could just drop off segments of their fingers and have them land and grow new versions of themselves. "Ew! Well, actually that'd be kinda cool" said Breay.



**EDGE students get to know their surroundings while helping with important scientific studies.**

Understanding that not all life reproduces the way humans do, but that all life does reproduce is a fascinating entry point into the incredible variety of life here on the planet and in our Sonoran Desert.

After all the groups had successfully navigated to and surveyed our 5 saguaros we met up again in the wash for some snacks and debriefing. The students were asked to share one memory that they would be taking away from the park that day.

Michael, a particularly rowdy student, started with a boisterous and humorous “I’ll be remembering that cactus I fell into and the darn ocotillo that poked me!” but then he spoke to the group sincerely, saying “Just being out here is really nice.” Every group of students that gets an opportunity to come outside says something about “being out here” and the emphasis that I normally hear is on the being. They have an

opportunity to breathe and experience life away from the stressors of their social lives and their school, work and home environments. TJ said that he was grateful for the opportunity to disconnect from his phone. Vicky, the youngest student on the trip and the only Sophomore, said that she liked getting to know her fellow students and interacting with people she never talks to at school. This group of students impressed everyone with their abilities in Saguaro National Park today.



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