



Trail Work and Teamwork by Sabrina Carlson

On April 19, 2016, 45 students from Mr. Caslin's and Mr. Doerfler's 5th grade classes joined the Coconino National Forest and members of the Arizona Conservation Corps to make some much needed improvements to the Arizona Trail on Passage 34 (San Francisco Peaks) near Snowbowl Road.

We divided the students into two smaller groups to work on different projects. In one group we played a game to demonstrate the effects of invasive weeds in an area. This game had students assume the role of either a native or a non-native, invasive plant. Game tokens that represent sun and water were then scattered around the playing field. Both native players and invasive players were instructed to collect enough tokens so they could survive until the next season and reproduce. In this case, invasive species had distinct advantages. Like cheatgrass, they began collecting these resources sooner, and needed fewer of them to survive. Adversely, since they make more seeds, they tend to produce more invasive plants each year. With the deck stacked against the native species, these invasive plants can take over quickly. After noting these different variables, we were able to discuss how this might affect the ecosystem as a whole. What animals rely on native plants for food? If those animals leave or die out for lack of food, what other animals might be affected? A concluding impression was made that invasive species can be extremely damaging to the entire system.

After learning why invasive species removal is important, we learned to identify a few common plants in the Flagstaff area. We then donned our gloves and started pulling all the ones we could find. Though we did find a few sizeable patches of toadflax and mullein here and there, there were less in this area than we expected. A very good sign!



Can you collect enough water to survive?



Yanking out the weeds!

The other group of students who were working on trail maintenance were busy learning about basic hydrology, the effects of gravity and gradient on water flow, and why switchbacks make trails more resistant to erosion. They worked hard building new drains, backfilling washed out trail, and rebuilding a crucial retaining wall that holds up part of the trail.

These two classes are among the youngest students we serve, and this work was hard and heavy. I was so impressed with their determination to make a difference and how well they learned to solve problems as a team and support one another. During our lunch break, Michelle Marisch of AZCC talked to the students about the many jobs and careers that are available in conservation and trail building as they get older. From AmeriCorps positions that help young people pay for school, to career paths in forestry, geology, biology, or conservation advocacy; the options are endless.

After lunch the groups switched so that everyone had a chance to do both activities. When the bus arrived we were dirty, tired and sore, but we had done our part for the Arizona Trail and felt proud of our work.



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