



Youth Stewardship in Action in Saguaro National Park

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In partnership with Saguaro National Park, the Arizona Trail Association's Seeds of Stewardship program created an unforgettable experience for six high school students during the spring and summer of 2016. The Saguaro Youth Corps Training Program was held from February to June, with four weekend work days leading up to a four-day summertime hitch in Saguaro National Park (SNP). The weekend work days were focused on tool training, trail construction techniques, and teamwork – which the students beautifully put into action during their work hitch.

The outings helped introduce youth to the art and science of trail construction and maintenance, and inspired them to consider a career in the conservation field. Thanks to support from the **Friends of Saguaro National Park**, crew members were paid a stipend for their participation. SNP's Trail Crew Leader Mareike Ann Flynn worked with the students every outing, instructing them about the importance of personal safety, tool usage, and how to read the landscape. She got to share some of the amazing things she had seen and participated in while working as part of a Trail Crew for a National Park.

On the first outing in SNP-East on March 26, the students met up at the tool shed and headed out into the park to learn about both the practical side and the bigger picture of trail maintenance. They learned to identify drainages and berms, and look at trail tread and corridor. On their second outing on April 2, they got their hands dirty while brushing prickly pear, palo verde, ocotillo and cholla on the Tanque Verde Ridge Trail. Students received many encouraging and appreciative remarks from the hikers they encountered while working diligently.



Seth, Mareike, Seamus, Oona and Manda on Signal Hill

On April 23, we met out at SNP-West, checking out the amazing petroglyphs at Signal Hill before getting to work on the trail. Mareike taught the students how to use a McLeod and shovel to help mitigate the negative impacts of erosion. Seamus and Oona teamed up as a fantastic duo of drainage diggers while Seth, Manda and Olivia worked hard busting berm and clearing off the trail. The students marveled at the saguaro cacti, already fruiting so early in the season, and we

watched turkey vultures drift in the cloudless sky. Our most exciting terrestrial encounter was when Manda, scraping away some decaying prickly pear, disturbed a striped-tailed scorpion.

During our fourth outing on May 7 we returned to finish the segment of trail we had started on the Signal Hill Trail. Temperatures were on the rise, but the students put in a full day's work. All of them demonstrated leadership and talent in both assessing the trail for necessary features and using their recently developed

skills to repair the trail to high standards.



Saguaro Youth Corps in action at SNP-West

The culmination of these outings was a work hitch on the eastern side of SNP-East. After grouping up at the tool shed on the morning of May 31, we began the scenic drive around the Rincon Mountains to our camping area on Turkey Creek Springs Road. True to its name, the first hint of life we saw were a few wild turkeys! Here, the large sycamore and oak trees provided a welcome canopy from the summer sun. Upon arrival, the students spread out with their tents, pads and sleeping bags, carefully choosing spots clear of any hanging branches. The kitchen set-up was next, and everyone showed teamwork in establishing everything we would need to cook, clean and maintain proper camp hygiene.

On the first day of June, we awoke to clouds and were treated to light sprinkles as we ate breakfast. After preparing the days supplies, we made the short drive to the Miller Creek Trailhead. Every morning before hiking in we grouped up to discuss safety and stretch our bodies to ensure a successful day. The primary objective was brushing the corridor on the Miller Creek Trail, which involved pruning thick stands of acacia and manzanita, as well as sawing off protruding juniper limbs. As we got to the task at hand, the clouds broke, revealing the heat that would accompany us for the next three days.



Heading into the backcountry for trail work in the Rincon Mountain District of Saguaro National Park.

Throughout the hitch, the students exemplified good communication and cooperation both on the trail and at camp. They were successful at settling into their own rhythms out on the trail, whether it was putting their heads down and focusing to achieve the day's goal or

playing “20 questions” while working to break up the monotony of the day. The afternoon hikes back out to the trailhead let the students see their work first hand, and they all noticed the vast improvements they had made to the trail. Evenings were spent preparing dinner, cleaning dishes and tidying-up camp. As the sun dropped below the Rincon Mountains and the air cooled, we conversed around the crackling of a campfire underneath a blanket of stars, enjoying S’mores and relaxing in a tranquil place.

Olivia, Oona, Seamus and Seth not only expanded their knowledge and experience in trail maintenance, but also learned proper backcountry camping techniques while making sure to leave this wild as pristine as they found it. Despite the heat and long days, these four students displayed enthusiasm along with a strong work ethic. As we drove back to civilization on June 4, they exuded a certain satisfaction and appreciation for the experience they had shared throughout the week. It’s probably safe to say this hitch changed their relationship with nature and they will forever know the challenging, often unnoticed, work that goes into maintaining trails that so many people enjoy.



**Trail maintenance in the summer is hard work!
Saguaro Youth Corps members catch a siesta after a
hard days' work.**

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