



Learning Our Way Up The Mountain

by Treven Hooker

On Wednesday, August 31, eight adventurers from Edge High School and their teacher Emily, embarked on a mission to explore and compare three separate biomes through Tucson's Santa Catalina Mountains.

This expedition marked the first outing of the semester, and the first trip with the Seeds of Stewardship program with these specific students. We introduced ourselves with our outdoor interests, names and grade. I shared my passions for the outdoors and outdoor education before we geared up and loaded into the van.

The day was warm and beautiful. Most students did not know each other and were reserved and quiet for the drive to the mountain.

Our first stop was at the very base of the Catalinas, still within the Sonoran Desert. We bushwhacked down into a drainage that harbored an abundance of life. Desert vegetation filled the drainage, from thick mesquite trees to majestic saguaros, all surrounded by blooming flowers. The animal life was abundant too, and became an immediate attraction to the students. We walked through the arroyo and discussed the Sonoran Desert biome. Talking about desert adaptations like a mesquite trees' special root system, or the shade cactus needles provide.

It did not take long for the students to become very comfortable out in the desert backcountry. They practiced their desert hiking skills as they traversed over loose dirt, large boulders, and cautiously through a cactus field. As their discomfort receded, their interest flooded forward. I soon found every student attentive and interested in everything the desert biomes provided.

We left the base of Mt. Lemmon and drove to a beautiful grassland biome full of endless green grasses, separated by sharp and vibrant yuccas and sotols. We stopped at the Molino Basin Trailhead of the Arizona Trail, and discussed what the Arizona Trail was and why it was important. We hiked along the trail, and identified similarities and differences between the current and previous biomes. The students used critical thinking skills and their imaginations to explain why there were such dramatic changes to the environment, and what the adaptations in this biome might be for specific plants and animals. We discovered pockets of water that were microenvironments to all kinds of insects, aquatic plants, and even red spotted toads.

We stopped at a vista looking out over the city, the Rincon Mountains, and the Tucson Mountains to discuss the geological formation of each, before heading back into the van to drive to the Marshall Gulch Trailhead near the top of the mountain. Its biome offered a display of montane plants and animals, sustained by cold, running water. The students enjoyed a lengthy hike though large and tall



pine and oak trees, weaving through tall fern patches, and hopping over rocks that pimpled out of rushing water.

By this time the students were connected and bonding both with each other and the wilderness around them. We paused to discuss this biome compared to the previous two, again analyzing each characteristic. I informed them that the Santa Catalina Mountains were a sky island, and described how they formed, and what value they provide to ecosystems below and around them. We discussed standard education vs. outdoor education, and what the students like about both. Students reported that they felt peaceful and calm throughout the day, and felt they could learn more productively outdoors.

After the students had their fill of fresh air and unbounded play, they sat and enjoyed the cool summer day. It was time to return to school, an action that the students did not take with excitement. We hiked back to the trailhead, holding onto each beautiful aspect of the forest as long as we could before winding streams, rocky spires, and pine canopies were replaced by winding roads, concrete buildings and cityscapes. Each student was nearly asleep when the van parked in front of Edge High School. High fives and reassurances that we would meet again in a month were delivered.



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

