



Gathering Desert Delights Along the Arizona Trail

by Treven Hooker

On September 12, 20 4th grade students from Mountain Vista Elementary School embarked on a wilderness adventure just north of Oracle. With their teacher, Julie Formo, we mirrored a trip taken only a week prior. Our mission was simple – travel beautiful desert landscapes to seek and collect prickly pear fruit. The fruit is bright red or purple, covering the landscape with sunset colors. Most animals can eat the fruit as is, but thin hairlike needles called glochids cause intense pain and discomfort for humans. Collecting the delicious fruit requires a delicate process, a task perfect for fourth graders.

Dark clouds swept across the sky, smearing thick black streaks of rain across the horizon. Above us, skies were clear, giving a rich blue contrast to the clouds. Our adventure began on Arizona Trail's Black Hills Passage. This trail winds itself through steep and abundant hills, dipping into drainages that provide close-up views of ocotillo, prickly pear, agave, yucca and more. As you rise from the drainage to the top of a butte, the view extends into miles of desert until the dramatic horizon swallows it whole.

Students poured from the van like rain from the sky, ready to explore, adventure, and collect. We discussed the biome we were in and its significance. We also talked about the Arizona Trail, and what exactly it was, how people use it, and the opportunities it provides adventurers. If the students were not already exited, now they were bubbling. We finished up with safety and the procedure of collection.



Students would use sticks and forks to knock the fruit off each pad. Then using forks, the students would stab the fruit, and deposit it into a large bucket. It was important that we did not totally deplete the supply of a single cactus, but only took a few from each. This, I explained, would allow us to share with the community of animals and plants who depend on this fruit for nutrients.

We set off down the trail, hiking for about 20 minutes before finding what appeared to be a field of prickly pear basically throwing its fruit at our feet. I split the group into four with a parent chaperone in charge of each, reminded them of the rules and behavior necessary for this mission, and set them loose. It did not take long for a smooth process to take place. Students were carefully removing the fruit from the pads, and filling the buckets. As the youth were



picking fruit, many saw just how many animals used this food daily. They were fascinated by the amount of fruit unfit for picking, as animals such as javelina, ants, tortoises, and more left evidence of their feast.

Prickly pear juice is a delicacy cherished by cultures of the Southwest for thousands of years. But many people have never tried it, and most have never made it. The students' mission only began with the collection. After the buckets were full, we carried them back up steep hills and to the van. The youth had to be pulled from the desert wilderness, as their attention was locked on the numerous bugs flourishing in early September. If they did not still have a mission to complete, they may never have left.

We returned to school with a plentiful bounty. Two buckets full of bright red fruit, ready to be processed into sweet and delicious juice. The students were thrilled, as their hard work had paid off. A day spent in the Sonoran Desert was rewarded with experience and laughter. Only a few days later each student had jars full of desert nectar. They worked very hard to collect the fruit and learned so much in the process. The experience of not just observing, but utilizing the natural resources of the desert near their homes helps develop an important bond between people and place.



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