



Experiencing Stewardship and History in Oracle State Park

by Zachary J. MacDonald

On the first snowy day of the season, 40 4th grade students from Oracle

Elementary gathered for a day of trail work and exploration on the Arizona Trail at Oracle State Park. Oracle State Park Ranger Gary Faulkenberry arranged the November 28, 2016 outing with the students' teachers, Julie Formo and Mrs. Sanchez who have been staunch advocates of getting the kids out for community service, exercise, science, and to learn about the history and natural environment around them. In addition, we had three adult volunteers to help organize the kids for some trail work and a hike on the AZT.



Learning trail stewardship and an appreciation for the land.

Gary has been working on clearing the high grasses that often come after heavy rains like we've had in recent months. The grasses were three to four feet high in some places, completely obstructing the view of the trail. Our task for the day was to rake the grasses off the trail to help define the tread and discourage seeding within the trail.

Despite the overcast morning after the first snow of the year had fallen in the Santa Catalina Mountains the night before, cool temperatures in the high 30's, and consistent chilly wind, we met at the Oracle State Park gate first thing in the morning. Kids were snug in their school bus so we ventured out to meet where Webb Road meets the AZT and began the process of unloading tools and kids.



Students from Oracle Elementary raking grass cuttings from the trail.

Gary and I began with a brief description of the trail, explaining that while we would only be experiencing a mile or so of trail that we're part of the whole 800 miles from Mexico to Utah and that every bit counts. We discussed the importance of tool and trail safety including hydration, awareness of hazardous plants and animals in the Sonoran Desert, as well as proper tool techniques. We reminded students to be aware of their surroundings and to be sure to look around and leave plenty of space between friends before using any tools.

We began at the trail kiosk and gate at the northern entrance to OSP. Each of the 40 students were given a rake and/or a McLeod to remove grass cuttings. We spread out over the half-mile trail as in meanders north toward Webb Road and cleared the trail handily in about an hour.

As we came back together, the kids were getting excited to start our hike to the remains of a Hohokam village, later inhabited by the Apache and Tohono O'odham who visited and lived in the area.



The San Pedro River Valley has a rich history. We discovered a few locations with bedrock mortars (*metates*), some as deep as 8 or 9 inches. The kids had heard about these before and some had been out to see them in person, so Gary asked if they knew what they were used for. Of course, they said, to grind grains and mesquite pods for flour. Gary also explained that it was common for granite to wear about an inch for each decade of use so this likely means that this particular set of indentations in the rocks had been in use for as many as 80-100 years. It is thought that the Hohokam resided in the relatively flat, grassy areas of the park and used the adjacent woodlands for hunting and food gathering 600-1,000 years ago.

The students were enthralled by the history and asked a lot of questions about these early inhabitants. We then hiked back to the bus and talked more about the trail and the landscape as we went. We would have liked to have lunch under the large mesquite tree near the OSP gate, but cool temperatures and higher winds made a retreat back to the cover of Oracle State Park ramadas more appealing.

While on the bus the students all agreed that they enjoyed their time on the Arizona Trail. They commented on the feeling of accomplishment of clearing the grasses and thanked us for the fun hike and information Gary was able to share about local history.



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