



## New Discoveries Close to Home

by Treven Hooker

On December 6, 2016, 18 students from Mansfeld Middle School and their teacher Julia Schumatcher gathered with excitement on a mild winter day dressed for exploration in Sabino Canyon. The intention in bringing students to this often crowded, semi-urban environment was to show them that there is a place nearby where they can visit with their families. It provides endless miles of trails with some being more popular and difficult than others. Sabino Canyon is an area that displays magnificent pools of desert water, sometimes in dramatic fashion.

We followed a less-traveled trail and only encountered two other people. Students took no time to explore and have fun. Roadrunners, lizards and birds grabbed the student's attention, but only for a short time. Fresh air and open space was attractive play and a highlight to their day.



ELD is short for English Language Development, and most students in this program are new residents to our country. To my surprise, most youth did not know what a saguaro was. Most students had little idea about the inhabitants, both plant and animal, that reside in our diverse biome. So naturally, the hike was fueled by curiosity as we discovered tarantula holes, diverse ranges of avian nests, and wild insects that inhabited all corners of the landscape. The questions that flowed from the minds of these students were creative and would probably stump even the most seasoned Sonoran Desert naturalist.

Our journey took us to a riparian forest. Tall sycamores and other deciduous trees along the stream showcased their beauty with a stunning display of colorful changing leaves. The youth were in awe, and this led to an important conversation about water in the desert.

I believe that in a convenient, self-made landscape, we lose a primal dexterity that gives us accessibility to wild lands. So, being that the students are young, their advantage of rock and boulder hopping was keen. As we traversed long sections of the creek, students did an excellent job practicing leadership and teamwork. A common theme was to find the roughest route, and help everyone in the group find their way across.

We ended up at the notorious Sabino Dam that is old, mossy, and built with large stones. Behind the dam rests a deposit of sand. Large trees, bushes, and Arizona grape grow in abundance here. The ecosystem that sits on a pedestal of sand differed from the riparian forest below. Atop is a wider softer place, each side walled with hills and rugged cliffs, jeweled with saguaros, prickly pear, and mesquite trees.



We arrived at a large pool of water, where rocks were stacked at a

bottleneck in the creek. Here, Angel (my co-leader) and I gave a lesson on the Sonoran Desert and the incredible biodiversity that survives here. Students were very interested in the desert plants' adaptations to water, and how so much life can survive with such a limited resource.

Students wanted to know how animals reacted to such little water, and what happens when there is no water. These questions opened a perfect and relatable theme about conservation and stewardship in the desert, especially as students sat sipping water and sweating from the intense sun. Protection of our desert water, and respect for its inhabitants had been a common conversation, but students sat quiet and attentive, as the reality was clear.

After the lesson, students separated and began a journaling lesson. Their objective was to observe and sketch different insects that lived in this ecosystem.

Before it was time to depart, a half-hour was dedicated to more play and adventure. Trees were climbed, crevices were explored, and fish and water bugs were analyzed. Our walk back was full of energy. Students bonded over the newfound wilderness not far from home, sharing an experience that few get while inside the classroom.



This Seeds of Stewardship outing made possible with support from

