



## Natural Learning in a Natural Place

by Treven Hooker

On December 15th, 2016, fourteen students from Superior laced their boots, and shouldered their backpacks in preparation for a desert adventure. December allowed for cool weather, and intense sun. This could not slow this 6<sup>th</sup> grade class whatsoever; they turned out to be almost as experienced as I am! Our mission was to hike near Picketpost Trailhead along Passage #17 of the Arizona Trail, and explore the wonderfully lush and diverse Sonoran Desert. Enthusiasm and ambition propelled the two 15-passenger vans forward, and the kids seemed almost as though they would rediscover the west. In front of a trail of dust, we were off.

In short time, we were on the trail. Towering saguaros and burly chollas greeted us, a sight benign to the students. We unloaded from the vans and circled up to discuss safety, goals, and proper hiking etiquette. Students agreed that a “no person left behind” rule was necessary, and understood that as a whole we were a unit. I explained the “Outdoor



classroom” being an imaginary space where when needed, students would gather in silence (in respect for interested peers) and observe, listen, and contemplate the teachings given by student or staff. I told them the three most important things (in my opinion) about being a naturalist were 1. Question everything 2. Think critically, 3. Imagination is essential. With these tools, we marched on.

Our first stop was when a group of students found a rock, covered in what looked like fuzzy multi-



colored camouflage, and asked “what is this?” They produced lots of theories, all of which seemed very plausible. I explained the symbiotic relationship between algae and fungi, and the wonderful result is lichen. The glasses of symbiosis were permanently worn, and new questions and discoveries were made hourly. The tall saguaros and the birds that live within them gave students a whole new perspective on desert homes.

Our hike progressed underneath the towering Picketpost Mountain. Students described stories of dangerous trails and missing hikers who attempted to ascend the mountain. All looked up with mythical awe, hoping to one day get to the top. But not today. The trail began to wind away from the mountain and touch a low arroyo. It was here that we took a much-needed break for lunch. Under shaded dry river walls we devoured our meals and refueled for the hike back. With peace and quiet, we observed the wild landscape in stillness. Stillness soon turned to feelings of stagnancy, and bubbling energy needed to be spent. A game of Ninja was in the works, reminding students of the games and fun away from TVs and video games.

We hiked back through the arroyo, and talked about water in the desert. We observed the noticeable difference in foliage near the arroyo verses hillsides. Students commented on the biodiversity, and its abundancy. Boulder hopping, sandy trudging, and shaded hill sides made an obstacle course out of a hike. This type of travel is important for anyone living in an urban environment, for it strengthens their skills for natural movement, and heightens their relationship with our natural world. It is a noticeable difference when a child is operating on all cylinders. Play quickly turns to discovery, to question, to challenge, to empowered knowledge, then back to play. When facilitated correctly, this produces the greatest platform of learning and retention of knowledge.



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