



Ancient Discoveries with Santa Rita High School by Treven Hooker

On December 20, 2016, four students from Santa Rita High School and their teacher Joshua Ruddick embarked on another Seeds of Stewardship adventure. Our mission was to explore the remote and rarely visited Ironwood Forest National Monument, and analyze the modern and prehistoric cultures that inhabited the area. The students were excited, but they had no idea just how exciting the day was going to be.

The day brought a cool kiss to the skin, but nothing unbearable. The sun wore a white veil, offering a soft glow to the vibrant colors of the desert. We drove west, heading for the purple Tucson Mountains and beyond. While passing through the mountains we discussed the environments that have thrived in this area over time. Students marveled over images of thick, tropical swamp forests leaving behind deep layers of volcanic mud.

Rain from a few days before puddled up in old tire tracks. With mild hesitation, we masterfully navigated the backcountry roads till we found ourselves at the trailhead. When each student was out of the van, I explained the true significance of this area. Out in this landscape is a sacred site to the Tohono O'odham. Between us and that site lies thousands of ancient potsherds, ancient structural remains, and hundreds of petroglyphs – infusing a spark to the dry tinder of our imagination.



As we walked, we discovered and analyzed the pottery. Questions such as “How did they make them? Why were they made? How old are they?” and “Who made them?” were repeatedly asked, and together we used deductive reasoning and our imaginations to come up with theories. I asked the students to imagine themselves in the spirit of the person who might have created the pot, and to think about the time, energy, and difficulty it took to create such a piece of art. This definitely became the most favored activity, as more and more decorated pieces were discovered and left to remain as part of the landscape.



After an hour of exploring, we came to the main event. A large hill decorated in white petroglyphs sat tall and independent. From the base, over a hundred could be counted from a single perspective. I encouraged students to use their imagination to interpret the stories told on these rocks. Ground rules were set, such as absolutely no touching the glyphs, no marking on the rocks, very slow and careful movements on the rock, and to always look before placing a hand or a foot anywhere in the area. With each student sure and aware of the rules, we set out to get a closer look. Dots and lines surrounded humanoid figures. Odd shapes and designs led the eye in a maze of directions while students created stories interpreting the images written by people from long ago.



Lunch was devoured on the rocky hilltop. A comfortable silence was heavy over the group. Uninterrupted Sonoran Desert landscapes offered a glimpse into what those who sat here before might have seen. I offered students the best sense of place as possible, so they could truly appreciate the culture and history that has passed over this specific place.

As we hiked back, we were greeted by the largest red-tailed hawk I have ever seen! It followed our van as we drove home, spreading its massive wings wide and far. It was a comforting farewell that seemed oddly intentional. The students found themselves pleased and content with our deep exploration of the area. Before returning the kids to school, we debriefed over snacks back in the city, an activity that gave the students a deeper sense of place within the present culture of living in the Tucson basin. With our mind and bodies full, we returned to Santa Rita High School excited for the next adventure.



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