



Saguaro Youth Corps: Winter 2016

by Treven Hooker

On December 27, 2016, four students woke up to a brisk Tucson morning ready to adventure into the mountains. These students are a part of an ATA program called Saguaro Youth Corps, a partnership program with Saguaro National Park and the Friends of Saguaro National Park. The program provides a stipend for students who participate in trail work and restoration inside Saguaro National Park, as well as incredible

back country experience. Each student has gains great deal of experience over the season, spending one Saturday per month deep into the Sonoran Desert doing intensive trail work. The collective experience up to this point had been preparing them for this outing, the first of four days camping at Madrona Ranger Station, out in the wild and remote foothills of the Rincon Mountains.

After each student was picked up, we arrived at Saguaro National Park East to collect gear and tools, and to do our final checks before departure. We selected tools such as pick mattocks, shovels, loppers, saws, and McLeods. These tools are used to remove all types of desert foliage that impede the movement of trail travelers. The students have become very skilled using these tools, navigating very precarious situations.

We were briefed by Adam Ryan that Madrona was not open to public access, and the only way to get to this camp without park officials was to hike over Happy Valley from the east side of the mountain range. To get to Madrona, we took a very long dirt road through lush Sonoran Desert. Winter weather had brought heavy clouds that soaked the desert floor in cold, plump raindrops. The desert reacted with vibrant green and yellow colors, complimented by dark earth tones and the sweet sounds of birds. The healthy desert was welcoming as we arrived to our camp.

Less than 50 yards away was a flowing creek, rushing heavy from snow melt in the distant mountain peaks.



That evening, we sat around a campfire enjoying a hearty backcountry dinner. As laughter and stories filled the cold night air, two pumpkin pies appeared from the cooler. Just a few days after Christmas, we indulged in the holiday spirit far from the comforts of home.

Above our heads the sky shined bright like illuminated pinholes against a black backdrop. As we sat admiring the seemingly endless view, we began conversation about the next four days. Safety was paramount, and the usual description of trail work ethics were brought up. Protective gear always worn when working. Correct ways to use tools and perform tasks. Outside of our usual safety talks, we discussed hygiene and camp ethics. I wanted everyone to feel confident and comfortable at camp, and a major factor is the organization and behavior of each camp member. It was no surprise everything operated smoothly throughout the trip.

The flames from the fire were small and starved as their fuel had reduced to coal and ember. The red glow was soothing to observe. Embers would shine bright with a furious red when wind touched its surface. Other spots neglected by breeze would deepen to a dark and faded glow. This unpredictable contrast shared close resemblance to the flickering stars in the sky. Cool air found its way over a weak fire and onto our skin. With our bellies full and eyes tired, students left the soft warmth and retreated to their tents.



The next day brought cold temperatures and white cloud cover. The desert responded softly, as if every creature were trying to sleep a few minutes longer. Students and staff converged at camp to eat breakfast and prepare lunches. After everyone was finished fueling up, bags were packed and gear was equipped. We began our hike down a dirt road that led us to the trailhead. Our plan was to start at the trailhead at 9 a.m. and work our way down the trail until 4 p.m. Students made quick work of overgrown prickly pear and intruding Ocotillo stalks. Since horses and mules travel these trails with humans on their backs we had to clear a wide corridor. This made our work extend farther into the bush and higher into the sky to remove obstacles that might harm riders or equines. Some students climbed unforgiving mesquite trees to remove protruding limbs, work that may have not been done for years.



Our progress was incredible, as students worked proficiently. Three quarters of this group had been involved with Saguaro Youth Corps in the Spring/Summer, and had developed dexterity when working on trails. Every cut and dig was done with intention and in a manner that would promote healthy growth and healing from the plant. Often plants that required removal would be dug out and replanted outside the trail corridor. Species such as

prickly pear are incredibly tough and resilient. As a general rule we do not disturb any cactus that is columnar.

After many hours of work, it was necessary to beat the growing intensity of the sun with some nourishing food. We hiked to a beautiful flowing creek, and listened to the fast and flowing water as it surrounded us. Even the sound of water is nourishing to the cells, making smiles stretch across the faces of the youth. We discussed the value of water in the desert, and how important winter precipitation is. It is important for students to understand that the surrounding sky islands provide a unique advantage absent from other desert regions. The high elevation acts as a net, capturing moisture and depositing it to plants and animals lower down. It is what made the Tucson area so habitable to indigenous cultures.

After lunch, we continued our work. Our efforts outdoors in the beautiful desert gave strength and satisfaction to every shovel dig and lopper cut. When the time came for us to finish for the day, we stashed our tool out of sight. Our intention was to continue our progress from the same place tomorrow. We hiked back to camp where students promptly dipped feet in the cool water, power napped, and emerged to get camp organized for the evening. Students used tools to chop and break firewood, making large piles of different fuel types. As that was taking place, other students began preparing dinner. Veggie chili was on the menu, and a lot of it. The whole process took three hours, and the recipe called for quite the ingredient list. Using cast iron pots, the perfect camp chili was made – enough to feed nine people multiple times.

The next morning operated with similar mechanics as the previous. Breakfast was devoured with gusto, and lunches prepared for the long day. Day three had a new plan. We would hike to yesterday's stopping point, and continue where we left off. At noon, we would drop tools and hike to Rincon Creek, a sure flowing stream that offered great views and a relaxing place to eat.





Our work was executed with grace and pleasure. Today had more laughter, camaraderie and appreciation than before. The views were soaked in like a dry sponge on water. Students worked carefully, trying to do the wild and wonderful landscape justice by creating a safe and smooth trail. A cover of white clouds blanketed the sky, like a long thin white sheet. This brought relief from the

sun, and produced a soft white glow to the landscape. Students felt a sense of calmness and ease in this weather, lifting moral and boosting cheer.

Noon came, and we promptly dropped our packs to set out for Rincon Creek. Our stomachs were already growling like dogs, pushing our footsteps faster along our path. The views were incredible as we ventured closer to the base of the Rincon Mountains. Mica Mountain towered tall above us, giving delicacy to everything underneath. The clouds soon thickened, turning their underbellies dark grey. A storm was brewing and rain was on its way. Our trail followed the ridge of the mountains before dropping down into the valley between the slopes of Rincon Peak and Mica Mountain. Cold drops of rain touched our skin like cold nails. In the valley, we found yellow grasses and mesquite trees tangled around us. As we hiked on, we pushed passed the rain showers and found Rincon Creek. It was not furious in flow, but humble and soft. Bedrock laid a soft path for us to navigate across the wide creekbed. Pools of water collected in areas around the stream, with tall grass and bush soaking up all they can. Lunch was eaten with patience, washed down with refreshing views.



Back at camp, our day was drawing to an end. Dinner tonight would be Sonoran style hot dogs. Wood was chopped, the fire was made, and the fire's heat was necessary against the cold teeth of the night. Students sharpened sticks to skewer hot dogs. Once each hot dog was wrapped with bacon and cooked over the fire, students made satisfied sounds like "Mmmmmm" and "Ooooooo" to profess such impression. Bellies full,



stars overhead and muscles tired from hiking and hard work, students made their way to their tents for their last night in Madrona.

The next morning our mission was to pack up camp and return home. More than anything else, we took our last day in the shadow of the Rincon Mountains to absorb all we could. Breakfast was special this morning, with cast iron eggs and potatoes. Students cooked and seasoned each with acute skill and taste, wrapping the deliciousness in tortillas to make bloated burritos. It was a delicious feast to match the sumptuous landscape.



Once camp was cleaned, we carefully examined and combed the environment for microtrash or anything left behind. When we all agreed the area was just as clean as when we found it, students set off to enjoy their last few moments in this beautiful wilderness. Down by the creek, heads and feet and spirits were submerged in the cool refreshing water.

Like pulling a splinter out from callused skin, getting the youth together for our departure was painful. Students explained how grateful they

were for the experience, and conversed about such feelings the entire trip back. This will be a standard hard to exceed. Yet most of these students will be back next season, working hard to do just that.

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