Exploring Special Places Ancient and Modern
by Sabrina Carlson

On September 5, 2017, seventeen students from Montessori Schools of Flagstaff Middle School hiked three miles in and around the local treasure that is Picture Canyon Natural and Historic Preserve.

We began our journey at the top of the canyon near the Wildcat Hill Wastewater Treatment Facility. We discussed the various stages of treatment water goes through before being released into the Rio de Flag in this location. We dealt with the common mythology that this reclaimed water is full of human waste. It is not. It does however contain very high levels of phosphate and nitrate which promotes rapid and sometime excessive plant growth in and around the waterway. These thoughtful and science minded students immediately wondered how far downstream they would need to go to escape the potential effects of these detergents on the ecosystem.

We continued our hike to the waterfall, a place where a volcanic lava flow provides a natural obstacle for the water to churn and take on more oxygen. Picture canyon is named for the petroglyphs that grace many of the rock faces of the area, and the first visible petroglyph can be found at this waterfall overlook. The students searched tirelessly and began to shout with excitement when they spotted the antelope high up on the opposite canyon wall. Students debated how and why a picture would have been placed so high on a cliff. Some suggested that the artist must have hung over the edge to drawn it upside down, others suggested ladders and scaffolding, while a few simply postulated that someone was an excellent rock climber.

We continued our walk to the junction of the Arizona National Scenic Trail Passage 32 (Elden Mountain). While passing through the ponderosa canopy near a water source we listened for bird sounds and looked around for evidence of avian friends like woodpecker holes and granaries.

Once we arrived at the lower petroglyph panels the students took out their field journals and began capturing their favorites in drawings and making guesses at what each of the drawings meant and
why the people might have put them here. Were they ceremonial? Communicating information? Were they simply ancient artwork?

After taking lunch near the bridge we played a game called “Meet a Tree.” Once a student is blindfolded, their partner has to safely lead them to a tree which they explore with all their senses except their sight. Later they are lead away in a circuitous path and must then figure out which tree was their own while still blind folded. Much fun, laughter and sense of place was built together.

It was a marvelous day with a curious bunch of students. I can’t wait to play with them outside again.

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