Getting Acquainted With Leave No Trace
by Sabrina Carlson

On September 19th, 2017, forty-two students from Sinagua Middle School’s MIT-E program learned the basics of LNT practices and why they are so important to our interaction with nature on our excursions.

We began with a classroom presentation overview of LNT ethics and what they mean. Students practiced the “rule of thumb” to gauge if they are too close to an animal and debunked common myths such as the assumption that apple cores and banana peels don’t count as trash (they do), or the belief that putting sand on a fire is sufficient to put it out (it isn’t).

After our classroom talk we headed to a nature path near school to walk the Unnature Trail. The Unnature Trail has a set number of preplaced objects along the path that don’t belong in nature. Some are meant to stand out and be obvious, while others are meant to blend in. Students walk the trail twice counting to themselves how many objects they find. Once they are told how many things are out there they walk one more time looking for things they may have missed. By doing this activity students experience both the surprising and uncomfortable feeling of seeing things in nature that don’t belong and how easily unnatural or even harmful objects could fall out of a backpack, blend into the grass and be forgotten. After completing this activity students quickly noticed bits of trash in the woods near their school and began spontaneously collecting it to take to the dumpster. No adult prompting required.

After our clean-up efforts we debated the relative merits and importance of different LNT ethics. Which is worse, dogs off leash or litter beside the trail? Abandoned campfires or toilet paper flowers in the forest? It is important to remember that while certain behaviors may not bother us, they may bother our friends.

Finally we took a moment to reflect in our journals on the statement from Aldo Leopold, “ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching; even when doing the wrong thing is legal.”
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