



## Desert Observations

by Treven Hooker

On September 22, 2017, 26 students from Paulo Freire Freedom School embarked on a desert adventure into Tucson Mountain Park. In a forest of desert foliage, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students were eager to begin their second expedition of the semester to explore and analyze the Sonoran Desert landscape, study its history, as well as their personal relationship and feelings when in our rugged natural space. This hike was long, warm, and enjoyable for only the most seasoned desert dwellers.

The David Yetman Trail granted us easy access into the rugged environment. Prepared with water, food, and proper clothing, nothing could stop these students. We began hiking south on the trail and were immediately surprised by the lush and thriving foliage, which must have received a healthy dose of our last monsoon rains. Red-colored rocks painted with vibrant green lichen, dotted and smeared with prickly pear, cholla, saguaro, palo verde, and so much more stood tall around us as we hiked along. The trail followed a series of converging arroyos, giving us the richest perspective of the Sonoran Desert.



On the trail, we found ourselves shadowed by massive hackberry bushes, a normally nice experience, but on this day it was better than nice, it was wonderful. Thousands of orange berries hung from the stems of the plant. They were so abundant anyone could grab a handful without much effort. The sweet berries were a real treat, and the students found themselves under the prickly bushes, eating until they were nearly stuffed. I explained that too much wild food can lead to a stomach ache, but that hardly slowed them down. I insisted the students leave some for the local desert dwellers, and only then did they finish their feast.

The day was cool, but the desert sun remained intense. Shade was sought periodically, and precious water was delivered from our increasingly valuable water bottles. This gave us the opportunity to discuss adaptations in the desert, how precious water is, and how the local fauna utilizes every drop. It surprised students to learn how much water exists in the desert, hidden within the bodies of plants and deep





underground. During our hike we found a deep rectangular cut in the ground the dropped 30 feet. At first it seemed just to be a hole covered by a metal grate, but upon further inspection a pool of water rested at the bottom. This was THE example I had been looking for, because this pool of water below the surface shows where the water table sits, not just localized, but over a large and long area. We discussed human impacts on our water table, and just how important this resource is to every plant and animal in our desert.

On the trail we soon found ourselves approaching an old stone structure. This is the Bowen Homestead, a stone house that was once a far and secluded home for the Bowen family. Here the students feasted on lunch, then each found their own secluded place to spend 10 minutes in silence reflecting on their experience outdoors. Equipped with notebooks and pencils, students were instructed to journal their internal and external observations. It was not a surprise, but pleasantly exciting to see each student looking out to ponder in sweet desert silence. When they returned, we formed a large circle and shared our

observations. Some students documented very literal experiences, both how they felt internally and what they observed externally, and the relationship between the two. Other students wrote in metaphors or analogies to describe their relationships with the outdoors.

Our hike back was quicker than out, both due to depleted supplies of water (and lighter backpacks) and the students' increased ability to maneuver the challenges of the desert. Our mission was a huge success, and each student demonstrated a superior ability to move, feel, and think outside. Our second expedition left everyone thirsty for the next adventure.



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