



## Reading Our Surroundings

by Treven Hooker

On September 28, 2017 10 students from City High School geared up for an adventure atop the Santa Catalina Mountains. This was the first hike of the semester with this sophomore literacy class, and their teacher Krista Gypton and I led the students outside to explore how literature and nature relate. Through a long and wonderful hike on the Arizona Trail near the Marshall Gulch Trailhead, youth examined the ponderosa pine biome, its creeks, hills, and massive views.

The drive up the Catalina Mountains is like driving across the country. Students were surprised and taken aback, as the diverse biomes changed outside the car window. When we reached the pine and conifer forests the students were eager to leave the van and enter a foreign world. Once the doors opened, fresh mountain air filled the lungs and only smiles were visible. We congregated across a flowing stream to a sandy island and discussed the day, my expectations, and outdoor safety. The students were more than receptive to the conversation. I asked the group to analyze their personal relationship with the outdoors, and how they interact with it internally as well as externally.

Once we began the hike, students started verbalizing how they felt outdoors, how certain views made them feel, and physically what their bodies were telling them. Stories from students about personal hardships, family issues, and normal life experience were expressed during the hike, a perfect time to do so. The wild places we explore are the perfect venue to see equality and non-human ecosystems. The students found freedom out here as they ran and jumped all over the place. Upon finding deeper pools of water, students quickly dunked their heads and splashed in the cold mountain water. At that point, we examined the unique and alien world of aquatic ecosystems, and compared it to the arid habitats we live in.

When we reached our destination, we climbed on top of a large protruding bolder that gave us stupendous views of the mountain range. Once we had our fill, we retreated into the shade of the forest for lunch. Students separated for 10 minutes to share a moment of silent observation of their experiences – internal and external. We congregated in a thick pine plot, pulled out our lunches, and began to devour our food while discussing literature. I explained my relationship to reading, and what it does for me; specifically, naturalist literature, and the freedom and education I find when reading it. I pulled out a book entitled *The Home Place* by J. Drew Lanham, and read the intro. The book is a biography, and is described as a “colored man’s love affair with nature.” It explores the lives of the Lanham family, and their experiences living through the 1900s. It is a wonderful book to



read when analyzing our own qualities that we feel are oppressed. We discussed nature, and how equalizing and grounding it is. Students described this to be a very impactful moment.



Once we finished the passage, and our food was devoured, students journaled their thoughts, packed up, and we began our descent. Here, more students opened up about their lives, and their strategies when navigating them. Students filled themselves of the remaining possible experiences out on the trail before reaching the van. They were all hopeful we could stay past the end of the school day, but I assured them another expedition was soon to come. Hopefully we will all carry the lessons learned from this day with us forever.

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