A Superior Expedition
by Treven Hooker

On November 3, 19 students from JFK Elementary School in Superior embarked on an adventure to explore and learn about the Sonoran Desert ecosystem. This was the first expedition of the semester, and the students were more than excited. Most of these students were experienced hikers, and ready to get on the trail. Using the Arizona Trail starting from Picketpost Trailhead, we ventured deep into the lush landscape, seeking edibles, wildlife, and an outdoor experience.

We began by discussing our visit to this landscape, and how to properly respect and take care of it. Some students were curious about the wildlife that lives in the area, and were hopeful we would see some. I described the javelina, mountain lions, snakes, coyotes, and so much more that are moving around this landscape like a busy city. The Sonoran Desert is one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the world. The youth were more than excited, and ready to explore. We took a group photo, then hit the trail.

The dusty trail was a soft path, allowing us to look up into the gorgeous landscape. Picketpost Mountain loomed massively over the landscape, towering and displaying the variety of flora in the region upon its steep walls. This gave an extra sense of wildness to the area, pushing us further and further. In our favor, we found the area blooming with desert hackberries. Together we stuffed our bellies full like black bears. We talked about the other plants that are fruiting, and after a better understanding of what we could and couldn’t eat, set out in search of tasty treats. This led us to find the small and well-hidden strawberry pincushion cactus, with its small but flavorful fruit that lit up the students’ faces. After devouring a few, the many abundant fruiting barrel cactus sat nearby, and offered a sour contrast to the sweet treats we had previously enjoyed. Sour flesh encased hundreds of nutty seeds, providing an energetic snack.

We continued to hike, studying the geology and ecology with every chance. After two miles, the trail dipped into a large arroyo, and here we sat down for lunch. The youth were very focused on not dropping or leaving any food. We discussed
how things biodegrade, and what that looks like in the desert. With that, we discussed the way animals digest food, and how although edible, things such as a banana peel can be harmful in the digestive tracts of many animals. This was something the students had not thought about before. When lunch was finished, we discussed water in the desert, and how vital these riparian areas are to the landscape.

Following the arroyo, we hiked back toward the vehicles. Using the arroyo as a path of travel brings endless fun. In the desert, free roaming play comes at a cost, usually a thorny, painful one. But here in the arroyo students were free to run, jump, lie down, roll, and chase each other with hardly a though about the common dangers of the desert. An abundance of beautiful rocks littered the wash bed, making this part of the hike seem more of a treasure hunt. I explained why we could not take any rocks or desert artifacts home, and what seemed to be piles of treasure poured from the students’ hands back into the sand.

We made it back in time for a group photo, then the tired and overheated youth loaded into the van ready to return home. It was a short drive, but long enough for many heads to slump to the side, deeply asleep. Those who were awake wanted to know where we were going next, what we were going to learn, and what the longest amount of time we could stay out could be. I said hours; they wanted days. It was a wonderful day out in the desert, full of wild food, beautiful rock, and endless fun.

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