Capturing the Experience
by Treven Hooker

On December 1st, 2017, twelve students from Imago Dei Middle School assembled for an early morning expedition. This was the second expedition of the semester, and after waiting almost a month since the last adventure, these students were more than ready. This expedition incorporated something new that no other SOS program has had in the past. Partnering with Parks in Focus, Imago students planned to learn about how to shoot digital photos, and how photography applies to science and naturalism. Using cameras, our mission was to explore the lush riparian corridor called Cienega Creek, learn about these natural highways, and observe the flora and fauna that called this creek their home. Most of all, our intention was about having fun and creating lasting relationships to this backyard paradise.

Using the Gabe Zimmerman Trail Head on the Arizona Trail, we crossed rugged Sonoran Desert landscapes before descending into what appeared to be a long ribbon of cottonwood, tamarisk, and birch trees that connected the Rincon Mountains to the Whetstone Mountains. Once submerged under the lush canopy, we made a human circle, where Julia Tenen from Parks in Focus handed out cameras and began a photography lesson. Here the students learned how to operate the basics of point and shoot cameras, and the philosophy behind naturalist photography. Once the youth had acknowledged they understood we settled up and began our adventure.

The group split into two, one removing shoes, socks and rolling up their pant legs to explore the cold aquatic aspects of the creek. The other took the lush footpath to enjoy wild green grass, massive cottonwoods, and a camera safe environment. Group #1 found themselves observing the microenvironment, and witnessing the complicated habitats in which these desert aquatic animal’s live. It was the perfect example of “micro” photography and seeing what the smaller picture looks like. Group #2 had wonderful perspectives, as giant cottonwood trees, while standing in grass and flower fields, shadowed them.

Though the trees still held tight onto their leaves, the fight from fall was well underway and the ground lay thick with sweet smelling decaying leaves. The students explored artistic elements, like throwing piles of leaves into the air, then quickly hugging before the shutter snapped. Their cameras took them into nooks, up trees, and even through small drainages that led to train tracks with tunnels.
underneath. These tunnels held another form of art that captured the student's attention. Murals were painted using spray paint, and the students found themselves capturing these old paintings in digital memory. It was a wonderful example of human infrastructures beginning contact with the natural world, and how people choose to utilize this space. One group travels by it, another paints on it, now we photograph it.

Our adventure took us through grasslands, Sonoran Desert, mesquite forests, and back into the creek. So many photos were taken through this range of environments, capturing the incredible diversity of habitat. This was a prime example of how photography can be used to document natural landscapes. On our return, we discussed what we learned and our favorite parts of the day. It was a wonderful expedition, giving students the opportunity to learn, play, and practice a whole new medium of art, education, and expression. As our natural landscapes continue to be threatened and reduced by human politics and infrastructure, these students use of photography not only captures the historical beauty of these locations, but captures their bonding and formative experiences with these natural areas. Even if the student's memory of this experience fades, the photos will remind them of the beauty, their connection, and the fun nature provides.

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