Empire’s Creek Adventure
by Angel Breault

On November 27th, 2017 a group of eight advanced placement students from Empire High School ventured out of the safety, security and stress of the classroom to explore a piece of wilderness less than fifteen minutes away from their school. Our primary goal was to take these students into the wild lands to simply unplug and unwind. As a consequence, we absorbed and learned more than we anticipated from this rare annual riparian forest.

Some of these students had never heard of Cienega Creek, despite the fact that the public county land is less than twelve miles from their school campus. As the Seeds of Stewardship van pulled into the parking lot of the Game Zimmerman trail head, I heard groans from the back seat of having to hike in the desert, getting poked by cactus, and the sun being hot. At first glance Cienega Creek is hidden by desert hills thick with creosote, prickly pear, and ocotillo. “This looks like my back yard” said a student, “we should have just gone hiking at my house!” he laughed. We laughed as well, eagerly anticipating the student’s reaction to the wooded oasis into which we would soon descend. Sure enough, our prediction was accurate. As we hiked through the seemingly dry arroyo, large golden leaved cottonwoods began to reveal themselves in the distance. Student’s indifferent comments to their everyday desert landscape made way for gentle gasps of surprise and delight as we neared the sound of the bubbling creek. Upon seeing water, an almost natural sense of elation and curiosity replaced the usual day-to-day concerns of GPAs and college applications that will not be sent off for another three years. Instead of worrying about their upcoming AP world history exams, these bright young minds were focusing their attention to the stream full of endangered native fish, like the Gila chub and the Gila top-minnow.

The excitement continued as we taught the students how to track local mammals. In a matter of minutes the students were confidently identifying the tracks of deer and javelina, and able to differentiate canine tracks from their feline counterparts. The soft, sandy, and sensitive soil was just moist enough to the degree that cultivated the ideal substrate for identifying fresh clear tracks.

The climax of the day came as one of the students stumbled across a large track that she said she could not distinguish between a canine or feline track. Expecting perhaps a cougar track, we went to investigate. As we neared, the student crouched over the footprint and we saw that the print was neither canine nor feline, but rather a large black bear track. Excitement, wonder and maybe a little fear surged through the students like a high voltage shock. “When was it hear?” one student asked, “Is it fresh?” her friend inquired. The track, being dried and slightly faded, was in fact
not fresh, but this did not halt the student’s enthusiasm. The buzz of energy and excitement that the black bear track caused didn’t die down until we announced to the group that it was time to return to school.

In a rather quiet and contemplative hike back to the Game Zimmerman trailhead, I heard students discussing amongst themselves quietly where they thought the bear had headed. How many lived in the creek, and were there cubs? Unlike our decent, no student made a single comment on the chaparral landscape as we climbed out of the arroyo towards our parking spot. All we heard was the incessant buzz of excitement and comments expressing their eagerness to get back out in the backcountry. An eagerness that is and was shared by all and any individual that loaded into the Seed of Stewardship shuttle that cool November afternoon.

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