Exploring the Politics of Public Lands Use
by Sabrina Carlson

On October 25, 2017, six students from Flagstaff High School's new Alpine program headed to Aspen Corner and the San Francisco Peaks Passage (Passage 34) of the Arizona National Scenic Trail.

Outdoor Discovery is a class focused on exploring the various access, management, and environmental considerations surrounding outdoor recreation and this was a perfect opportunity to combine experiences with local issues and debates. Our goal was to enjoy and experience a lovely day on the peaks and discuss a variety of topics around public land use, management and debate the merits and flaws of various types of management strategies.

We headed north along the Arizona Trail to the intersection with the Aspen Loop. We took the southern arm of the Aspen Loop up to a nice spot in the meadow where we could enjoy the waving golden grasses of late fall and see the huge mound of dirt and construction in the meadow where Arizona Snowbowl is currently building a new parking lot. Here students had a chance to reflect in their journals about how the bare dirt and construction site in an otherwise pristine appearing meadow made them feel. Most found it jarring, surprising and upsetting.

Wanting to make sure we always balance these discussions I pointed out that we were looking at about an acre of earth that had been scraped bare, the equivalent amount of land that would be denuded by 3 miles of new trail. Often when we denounce one kind of development we forget that we might enjoy other forms. We walked through a high level conversation of the NEEPA process that the Forest Service uses to decide if a project, like a trail or new parking lot, are likely to provide more value then do harm.

We followed this discussion by reading three news articles from the snowmaking debate of a few years back. The articles ranged from pro snowmaking to anti and one that was fairly neutral. The students practiced picking out the pro and con arguments from each piece and critically evaluating the emotional response the author was trying to evoke.
After the heavy discussion we spent sometime exploring the grasses and trees. We looked for colors and brought back interesting things that we found in the forest.

Finally, before our final walk back to the bus, we reflected on a quote by Aldo Leopold that reads, “Ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one is watching, even when doing the right thing is legal.” We explored some tricky questions and interesting debates. While everyone may have reached their own conclusions about particular issues, as a group we left the conclusion as simply this: There are no easy answers and there are always opinions to be considered on all sides. The most important thing is that we keep asking the right questions.

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