Setting the Stage For A Year of Learning
by Sabrina Carlson

On September 13, 2017, sixty-five students from Kinsey Inquiry and Discovery School 5th grade traveled to the Centennial Forest in Flagstaff’s Rim Country to camp in canvas tents and learn about a variety of topics that would serve them throughout the school year.

The primary goal of the teachers was simple, to make sure the students understand the community partners they would be learning from throughout the year and had a solid sense of outdoor ethics, expectations, and safety. The teachers brought our partners from NAU, Willow Bend, and Coconino County Search and Rescue. They learned how to conduct themselves in an outdoor classroom, what to do if they ever get lost in the forest on a trip with their school or family, and important information about the ecology of the forests of Northern Arizona.

After their morning rotations I had the chance to teach them about Leave No Trace ethics while on the trail. We went through the basic LNT practices and discussed each one. We glued LNT guides into our field journals, and had a friendly but lively discussion about different outdoor ethical problems and which ones are the “worst.” Is toilet paper in the forest a bigger problem or ten fire rings in a campsite? Is it better to harass the wildlife, or leave your campfire unattended?

After our discussion, we set out on a 2 mile “unnature trail” hike. Before our activity I had placed 12 objects along a short section of our hike. When we arrived at this part the students were asked to walk through looking for things that didn’t belong. I asked that they not tell anyone what they found, but after everyone had come through they could share how many items they saw. Then we passed through a second time. Then, they were told how many things to look for and asked to look one more time to see if they could find everything.
Once all the unnatural objects were located and collected we talked about how some of these things were bright, garish, and super obvious. It wasn’t very pleasant to find them in the forest. But some items blended right in and were hard to find. These pieces may not be apparent to the humans, but animals might find and eat these missing pieces of unnature. That’s why we must be very, very thoughtful about small or easily hidden trash that can fall from our hands or backpacks. The students loved playing the game and seeing what they could find, and this made being mindful of our lunch trash much easier to understand.

Having now had more outings with this class this year, I can say without a doubt that spending the time to really set the culture and expectation with these students in a fun and engaging way has led to a productive and peaceful collection of excursions all semester long.

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