

Welcome Home: Navajo and Hopi Students Camp at the Grand Canyon



With the Arizona Trail Association's Seeds of Stewardship Program

The Arizona Trail Association's Seeds of Stewardship (SOS) program provides free, meaningful outdoor experiences to inspire the next generation of stewards of trails and public lands.



Over the past years, SOS has worked with 4th through 8th grade students at STAR School (Service to All Relations), which serves Native American students from Flagstaff and the Navajo Nation. SOS takes each student out for five field trips during the school year with a focus on facilitating culturally relevant outdoor experiences, connecting with the land and each other, and performing meaningful stewardship projects.

As a finale for our school year with the 4th and 5th graders at STAR, SOS organized three days of camping, stewardship, and cultural experiences at Grand Canyon National Park and Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni - Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument.

After months of anticipation from students and teachers, SOS educators arrived at STAR School with two 15-passenger vans and a trailer loaded up with all camping gear, food and kitchen equipment needed for the trip. Students loaded their personal items into the trailer and we set off for our first destination: the Desert View Watchtower in Grand Canyon National Park.

Clark Tenakhongva, Arizona Trail Association Board Member, musician, and former Vice Chairman of the Hopi Tribe, was the first to welcome us to the Grand Canyon.



Clark Tenakhongva welcomes students to the Grand Canyon.

“We are Native American. We are stewards.”

- Clark Tenakhongva

Overlooking the canyon, Clark spoke with students about the legacy of uranium mining on ancestral lands and ongoing health impacts. He then described the historic campaign to protect over 900,000 acres from active uranium mining claims by establishing Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni - Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument.

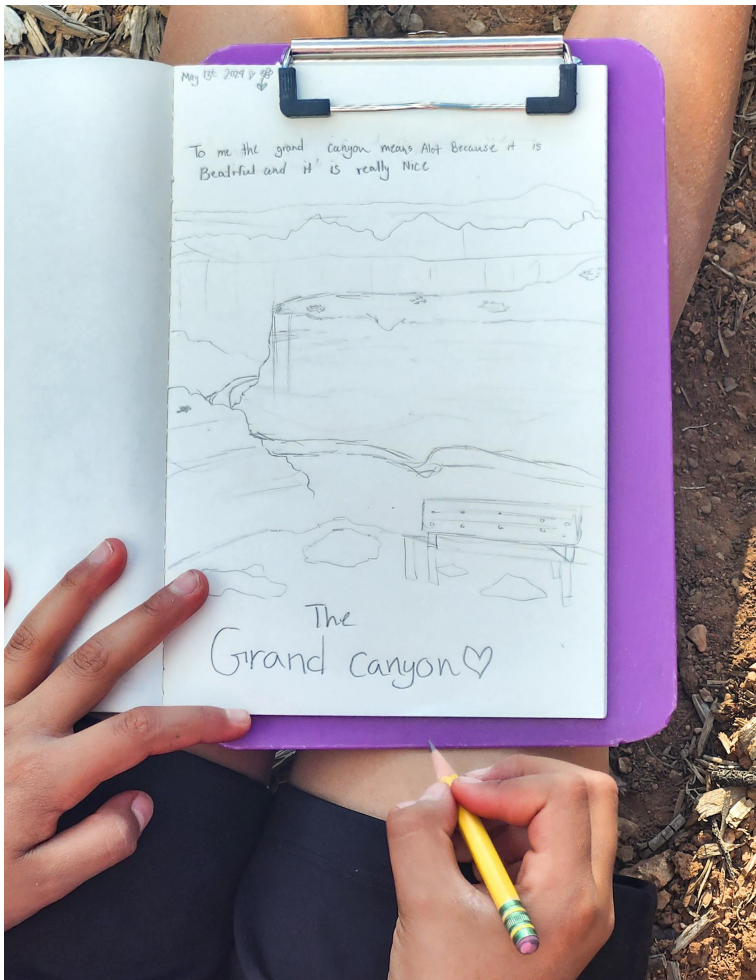


Students work on a stewardship project on the final day of the trip.

Clark shared lessons from the campaign and emphasized to students the importance of civic engagement: “We are Native American. We are stewards. As stewards of the land, it's our duty to make sure we protect the land, first and foremost.”

Earlier in the day, students listened to Clark's newest album *Hon Muru (Bear's Ears)* while visiting Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni. Clark was instrumental in the establishment of both these National Monuments, and he ended his talk by performing a song from the album.

On the drive along the rim to Mather Campground, we were dazzled by the first elk sighting of the trip: a five-point bull elk grazing roadside. It was the first of many wildlife sightings, and students learned to estimate how much space to give wildlife using the “rule of thumb:” If you hold your thumb up at arm's length and your thumb can't cover the whole animal, you are too close.



Upon arriving at Mather Campground, we watched an elk graze in our group campsite as we gathered for a community circle.

Students then divided into tent groups, chose their camp locations, and set up their tents in teams. An hour of cozy down time in tents after getting everything set up helped students, many of them first-time campers, establish a sense of security and belonging in their sleeping spaces.

More elk, some of them pregnant, were sighted as we took an evening walk on the Arizona Trail (AZT) before circling up and journaling. Through writing and drawing, students explored and shared about their existing relationships with the Grand Canyon.

After dinner and s'mores cooked over the fire, students participated in a special ceremony where they nominated each other for colored beads representing examples they noticed throughout the day of classmates demonstrating courage, friendship, intelligence, teamwork and respect. Half an hour of cozy time in the tents before lights out further helped individuals connect with tent buddies and emotionally transition to a night outdoors and away from home.

The next morning began with an exciting breakfast of flying pancakes and a syrup waterfall, both served by SOS educators standing on top of picnic tables. We then packed a lunch and hopped on the park's shuttle bus to head to South Kaibab Trail, where students began by observing the canyon and making art in their journals.



After wrapping up journaling, we were greeted by Vincent Diaz, Grand Canyon National Park Tribal Program Assistant: "Welcome home. The Grand Canyon always has been and always will be your home." Vincent spoke about his personal Hualapai connection to the land and shared about the 11 tribes, including the Hopi and Navajo, who call the Grand Canyon home. He spoke about efforts to protect and teach the cultural history of the Grand Canyon, and about the diversity of ongoing cultural and spiritual connections that exist in the National Park.



Vincent Diaz speaks with students about the 11 tribes that call the Grand Canyon home.

“Welcome home. The Grand Canyon always has been and always will be your home.”

- Vincent Diaz, Grand Canyon National Park Tribal Program



A mule train driver speaks with students in Navajo.

Vincent also described the plants and animals that we might see on our upcoming hike, and described how to recognize a California condor by looking for the patches of white under the wings.

We then began our descent into the canyon on the South Kaibab Trail, which is also Passage 38 of the AZT. Along the way, students were delighted to be greeted in Navajo by a mule train driver coming up from Phantom Ranch. Some students shared in the evening circle that this was a highlight of their day.



Everyone made sure to practice “oohing” and “aahing” in anticipation of arriving at Ooh Aah Point, much to the amusement of fellow trail users. Upon arriving at the panoramic view of the Grand Canyon, students rested and took photos before beginning the much more challenging hike back towards the rim.

Lunch break on trail brought two wonderful surprises. The first was a California condor soaring just overhead, identified by students by applying what they had recently learned from Vincent Diaz. The second surprise was an AZT thru-hiker that had begun his hike at the Mexico border. He enthusiastically spoke with students about his experiences on trail, leading a few students to express that they want to someday thru-hike the AZT.

After completing the hike back up to the South Kaibab Trailhead, we hopped onto the park shuttle and departed for the Visitor Center. Students created a story in their journal based on the hike and stamped their journals with the official Grand Canyon National Park Passport Stamp while waiting for a showing of *We Are Grand Canyon*.

We Are Grand Canyon is a brand new film developed by the Intertribal Working Group and Grand Canyon Conservancy. It welcomes visitors to Grand Canyon National Park with the voices of those who have called the Grand Canyon home since time immemorial - the 11 Grand Canyon tribal communities.



Students watch a California condor soar overhead.

Grand Canyon Tribal Affairs staff were excited for these students to be the first group of Native American youth to view *We Are Grand Canyon*.



After the film, SOS educators facilitated a conversation where students shared powerful emotions about loss of land, reconnection with culture, and the beauty of song and dance in the film. Many students later shared that the film was the highlight of their day.

Students watch We Are Grand Canyon, a film by the 11 tribal communities of the Grand Canyon.

“This is your home. It’s not legally put on paper or signed in a document, but this is our home and we take care of it.”

- Dianna Sue WhiteDove Uqualla, from We Are Grand Canyon

A visit to the Grand Canyon Conservancy park store allowed the class to stock up on stuffed animals, books, binoculars, and hands-on science activities to enjoy back at camp. A quiet sit spot facilitated by SOS educators provided the opportunity for students to reflect on their day and observe nature before a dinner of “pasghetti,” which is a “classic Italian dish traditionally eaten without the use of the hands.”



“Pasghetti” dinner is traditionally eaten without the use of hands.

Before bed, we reflected on our day while sitting around the campfire with hot chocolate. Students shared their perspectives and feelings, and engaged in another bead ceremony where they nominated each other for more examples of courage, friendship, intelligence, teamwork and respect, adding a bead representing each of these to the twine on their name tag necklaces.



The third and final day of the trip centered around a stewardship project on the AZT. After a quick breakfast and breakdown and loading up of camp, we traveled to Grand Canyon Camper Village in Tusayan to meet Romy Murphy, Grand Canyon Conservancy Field Institute Program Manager and AZT Passage Steward.

After journaling and exploring their own relationship with the concept of stewardship, students learned about personal protective equipment and how to use common trail tools. Romy Murphy then led students in trailwork on Passage 37 of the AZT, which was damaged by flooding the previous year.

Students used shovels, pick mattocks, and McLeods to recut sections of trail, removing tough grass, mud, and loose rock that obscured the existing route.

Two gates that had been buried in mud were dug out by teams of students, allowing the gates to open again and for hikers to pass through instead of climbing over a fence.





Three AZT hikers admire the newly cut trail and thank students for their work.

Just as students were finishing their projects, three AZT hikers approached on trail, admiring the fresh work and thanking the group for improving the trail.

Lunch was served at the trailhead before a final closing ceremony in the shade of a huge Ponderosa pine tree. SOS educators facilitated an activity for students to individually acknowledge every classmate who helped them feel safe, have fun, learn, and grow throughout the trip.

It was an emotional ending to a powerful and meaningful trip that also marked the end of the school year. SOS is excited to continue facilitating experiences with these same students over the next years, and to organize future camping trips with other classes at STAR School.



The Arizona Trail Association would like to thank all those who made this trip possible. Support from sponsors allows SOS to provide entirely free programs, and to focus on partnering with demographics often underrepresented in conservation and outdoor recreation fields.

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