SYMBIOSIS

A Newsletter of the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority Spring 2012

Connecting Children to Nature

Senator Fran Pavley Visits an MRCA Education Program

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Symbiosis
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Cover: Sen. Pavley with a group of students from Chaparral Middle School during a trip to King Gillette Ranch

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Greetings from the MRCA

Greetings Friends,

OK, put on your thinking cap as I start off with a personal question… What are some of the fondest nature memories of your childhood? Was it running through an open field with the wind blowing on your face? Making a whistle out of a long blade of grass? Was it sitting on a blanket having a picnic lunch with family, friends and occasionally ants? Was it climbing a tree in your backyard? Possibly catching fireflies on a warm summer evening? (A one time experience, but it remains in my mind.) How about looking up at the stars at night searching for "falling stars" and making wishes or sitting by a campfire and roasting marshmallows? If you are like me, these are all experiences that can stay with you forever, and hopefully I've triggered some of *your* special childhood memories of being outdoors. Yet for the past many years as you may know, there is an alarming trend of children spending less and less time in the outdoors and spending more and more time cooped up inside and in front of televisions and computers playing games or watching movies that leave less for the imagination.

Recent studies show that children are spending about half as much time outdoors as they did just 20 years ago[i] and only 6% of children are playing outside on their own.[ii] This results in children missing out on the many positive benefits of playing outside that directly impact their mental, physical and emotional health.[iii] Spending time in nature is not only important for a healthy childhood, but it also fosters a lifelong connection to the outdoors.[iv] Luckily, there is a ray of hope as much work is being done to reverse this disheartening and less than healthy trend.

Nationwide, there are a growing number of researchers conducting studies to measure the effects of what has been described as the "nature-deficit disorder".[v] Also, groups like the Children & Nature Network and the No Child Left Inside Coalition have created grassroots campaigns to educate parents, teachers and communities on how to reconnect children to the outdoors.

Actually a lot has been occurring on the state level to address this negative trend. In 2003, the California Board of Education passed the Education and Environment Initiative (EEI), authored by State Senator and park advocate Fran Pavley. This piece of legislation incorporates environmental education into the state's required curriculum, helping to bring nature and the environment into the classroom. Then in 2004, the state adopted the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights, the first of its kind in the nation. This Bill of Rights lists basic outdoor experiences that every Californian child should have, including sleeping under the stars, following a trail, or planting a seed.

We at the MRCA also hold this issue close to our hearts and a focus of our many programs, as a lot of the staff entered into this line of work because of their own childhood experiences outdoors in nature. MRCA's open space and urban parks are perfect locations to get this much needed time outdoors for both children and adults. Our education programs, including the school day programs at Franklin Canyon and our Outdoor Education camps at Temescal Gateway Park and King Gillette Ranch provide memorable nature experiences for local students. And by incorporating both the EEI curriculum and the Children's Outdoor Bills of Rights into our education programs, we introduce and help broaden student understanding of the natural environment around them.

In this edition of the *Symbiosis,* we are doing things a little different in that many of the published articles were written by individuals who experience our programs first-hand. Teachers, principals, students and staff, who have actually participated in our education programs tell their stories! They talk about what they did and describe the impact of these programs on students. Through their personal stories, we hope to show how this perfect pairing of parks, open space and programs creates the ideal environment for children to spend time outdoors and to develop the essential connection with nature.

May your children, your grandchildren and even yourself, have opportunities and neat experiences in the outdoors that will provide wonderful memories to look back on.

Sincerely,
George Lange, Chair of the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority

i Juster et al, 2004, Burdette & Whitaker, 2005, Kuo & Sullivan, 2001; ii Children & Nature Network, 2008; iii Randy White, 1998; iv Wells and Lekies, 2006; v Richard Louv, 1995, Last Child Left in the Woods

A young boy finds joy in the small wonders of a creek

The World Outside

Connecting Children with Nature - By Robin Smith, MRCA Interpretive Staff

Catching ladybugs, digging a hole to the center of the earth, running through sprinklers, making forts; like many of you, I spent a lot of time playing outside as a kid. Our neighborhood was a child-sized kingdom full of adventures waiting to be had, discoveries to be made, and mad, crazy, frenetic games fueled by our imaginations. Nature was a wild and limitless source of entertainment; trees to climb, lizards to chase, fuchsia flower ballerinas, picking wild berries alongside shady wooded creeks. Looking around, you can see that urbanization has overtaken nature and this has changed the way that children play and learn.

It has only been in the last 100 years or so that families migrated to cities in search of work, driven by the industrial revolution, the Depression, and the disappearance of the family farm. Before that, about 90% of families lived in rural or agricultural areas. Children experienced and learned about nature first-hand. Now, three quarters of the population of the United States live in urban areas.[i]

In a little more than a century, the daily lives of children have changed dramatically, from toiling in factories in the 19th century, to the parent managed structured play dates of today. Most children live better, healthier lives than of old, with a big exception: children spend less time outdoors than ever before. A lack of time spent outdoors can cause or aggravate childhood behavioral problems. Richard Louv, in his book *Last Child in the Woods,*[ii] coined the phrase "Nature-Deficit Disorder," to describe this phenomenon. All of this has renewed interest in nature and the environmental movement.

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) is helping by creating more urban parks with natural areas and programs to connect children with nature, and bringing city kids into natural parks by providing transportation and naturalists as guides.

A Little Park History

Imagine a city with no green space, parks or playgrounds, only sidewalks, streets, buildings, and man-made things. Where would children play?

America's most stunning and unique wild places gained the protection of the federal government and became natural parks late in the 19th century. Natural parks are spaces left untamed, retaining indigenous flora and fauna, conserved to remain as formed by natural forces. Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon were among the earliest areas to receive Federal protection from urban development, parks we still enjoy today.

Locally, Griffith Park became Los Angeles' first natural park in 1896, when Colonel Griffith J. Griffith donated five square miles to the City as "a place of recreation and rest for the masses, a resort for the rank and file, for the plain people," said Griffith. "I consider it my obligation to make Los Angeles a happier, cleaner, and finer city."[iii]

Throughout the 20th century, a series of natural parks were preserved and restored throughout the Santa Monica Mountains, just west of Griffith Park. They became the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreational Area by act of U.S. Congress in 1978. The MRCA, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC), the National Park Service (NPS), and California State Parks have together conserved 153,075 acres of natural parkland.[iv]

The invention of the children's playground was another aspect of the park movement, occurring around the same time that Griffith Park was donated to LA. While natural mountain parks offer numberless recreational opportunities, they can lack safe, supervised areas for young children. These parks are often in rural or suburban areas, hard to reach from the inner-city. Before there were playgrounds, urban kids played in the streets or empty lots near their homes.

In 1887, the first American playground was built in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, featuring slides, swings, and a goat cart ride. Los Angeles was the first American city to create a municipal Playground Department in 1904, "to provide wholesome and constructive play and recreation for youth, in supervised playgrounds, as an alternative to play in the city streets."[v] This was followed by LA's first playground, built near City Hall in 1905. As ubiquitous as neighborhood playgrounds are today, they are a relatively new concept.

Traditionally, urban playgrounds have rarely been designed to encourage nature play. Prefabricated playground equipment, designed with predetermined themes and uses don't inspire imaginative play. Nature provides a rich landscape in which children can dream and pretend. The latest trend in playground and urban park design is to incorporate an area for nature play with trees, and things like sticks and blocks to build with. For example, the MRCA's Vista Hermosa Natural Park in Downtown LA combines traditional recreation

Being introduced to Black Sage

Flying a kite at King Gillette Ranch

Helpful Resources for Parents

Want to find ideas and activities to get your family outside and into nature? Check out these websites and books:

- Children & Nature Network: www.childrenandnature.org/
- National Wildlife Federation's Get Outside: www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Be-Out-There.aspx
- *Sharing Nature with Children* by Joseph Cornell, a favorite among outdoor education
- *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv, learn about what you can do to help with nature-deficit disorder

areas with natural areas complete with trees, native plants, and water elements.

Children of all economic and cultural backgrounds play in nature in similar ways. Author David Sobel gives the example of trees and what children do with them. "They climb on them, build forts in them, read in them, hug them, make nests with their leaves, create carnival rides on their branches, play with dolls in their shade, gaze at the sky through their leaves, become friends with them."[vi]

Venturing a little further into the outdoors, how wonderful would it be for a child to live in nature for a few days and nights?

Overnight in Nature

Away at camp in the great outdoors, far from home, kids have the unique opportunity to learn about nature on its own terms, away from the distractions of the city.

Children's camp, as we know it, began about 150 years ago. In 1861, Connecticut school headmasters William and Abigail Gunn took a group of kids into the wilderness along the Long Island Sound for two weeks of hiking, boating, fishing, and sailing. Parents saw the positive influence this had on their kids.[vii] The Gunns had started the first overnight camp in the United States and the idea caught on.

Influenced by cultural trends and economics, children's camps have changed over the years, while retaining the spirit of immersion in the outdoors as a fun learning and recreational experience. Some camps are private, many of which are sponsored by youth and community organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the YMCA, JCA, churches, and synagogues. School districts also began to offer outdoor education overnight camps.

Students play games during camp at Temescal Gateway Park

Private overnight camps and those sponsored by school districts have many similarities, but also differences in purpose. While private camps emphasize recreation, and a vacation from home (or a vacation from the kids), school outdoor education camps have a different agenda. They offer hiking, stargazing, nature exploration, and include lessons on environmental science topics. These lessons tie in with subjects taught in the classroom, and allow kids to watch natural science unfold - in nature.

While many private camps are thriving, major funding cuts in public schools have severely limited the number of children able to participate in outdoor education, and many programs have been eliminated. The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is just one example of a school district affected by budget cuts, resulting in dramatically fewer children able to attend camp through their schools.

Today more children go to summer camp than ever before, most go to private camps which can be quite expensive. While scholarships are available to a limited number of children, basically those who can't afford to go, don't.

MRCA & Outdoor Education

For over 25 years, the MRCA and its partner the SMMC have made it their mission to give inner-city children meaningful nature experiences, and "provide recreational access from downtown Los Angeles and the inner city… to anyone wishing to enjoy the Santa Monica Mountains."[viii]

In 1985, the MRCA entered the world of outdoor education with day programs at the William O. Douglas Nature Center at Franklin Canyon Park. We started a school field trip program, bringing kids from all over LA County for fun and educational nature walks. Lots of kids had never been in untamed nature. Visiting a local nature preserve dispelled fears of the outdoors, and they loved the experience so much that they came back with their families.

The success and popularity of our day programs led us to branch out into overnight outdoor education programs. The chance came when the SMMC bought Temescal Canyon in 1995, which could accommodate an overnight camp. We met with local educators and

arranged camp scholarships for children from South LA. Our success led to a contract with the LAUSD and for 15 years, thousands of children have enjoyed Temescal Field Science Camp.

With the acquisition of King Gillette Ranch in 2007, the MRCA now had another property that was perfect for outdoor education. The local school district, Las Virgenes Unified School District (LVUSD) had lost their camp at about the same time and we were able to step in and fill that need. For the past five years, kids from LVUSD schools have been enjoying overnight camp, learning lessons about nature and the environment.

By incorporating the best of both traditional camp and environmental education, we provide a well-rounded experience for all students. Campfires, night hikes, nature exploration and time for nature play allow students to enjoy all the memorable activities of any camp, while also participating in many of the outdoor activities listed on the California Children's Bill of Rights (see box above).

California Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights

Objective: That every child in California, by age 14, has the opportunity to participate in each of the following activities listed within the California Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights.

The California Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights states that every child should have the opportunity to:

- Play in a safe place
- Explore nature
- Learn to swim
- Go fishing
- Follow a trail
- Camp under the stars
- Ride a bike
- Go boating
- Connect with the past
- Plant a seed

Source: www.calroundtable.org

The lessons at our day and overnight programs focus on the unique Mediterranean ecosystem, indigenous local history and threatened watersheds, and are tied to California State Standards and the Education and Environment Initiative (EEI) (see box on page 8). The students are able to learn their required curriculum outside the classroom and bring this back to school, creating a unique and broad understanding of environmental science and conservation.

Final Thoughts

Time spent playing in nature – especially unstructured, imaginative, exploratory play – has long been recognized as an essential component of wholesome childhood development. Children who play outside are more physically

Volunteer Naturalist Paula shows students leaves at Franklin Canyon Park

active, more creative in their play, less aggressive, and show better concentration. Natural parks invite children to act on their natural curiosity and imagination.[ix]

Camp and field trips to natural parks make the environment "real" for children who are so often limited to the classroom due to lack of funding and the enormous amount of time dedicated to studying for standardized testing. By focusing on environment-based topics in an outdoor setting (climate change, conservation and local wildlife), but within the existing academic framework, students learn how these issues affect them personally, and how they can contribute to a sustainable future.

Time spent outdoors, away from television and computers can help with some of the problems that plague kids today, such as childhood obesity,[x] ADHD and depression.[xi] Outdoor play is active rather than passive, teaching children to be more confident and independent, and gives them an awareness of the environment and how to protect it. The benefits of nature play and being outdoors are crucial for growing children (and adults, too!).

i World Resources Institute, Facts About Urbanization in the U.S.A., World Resources 1996-97

ii Last Child in the Woods, by Richard Louv, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008

iii Griffith J. Griffith, City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, 2012

iv National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/samo/faqs.htm

v LAParks.org

vi Sobel, David, "Childhood and Nature Design Principles for Educators," Portland, Mian, Stenhouse Publishing, 2008

vii Summer Camp Handbook, by Jon Malinowski & Christopher Thurber

viii Santa Monica Conservancy Public Resources Code Section 3200-33215

ix Burdette and Whitaker, 2005; Ginsburg, et al., 2007

x Association of access to parks and recreational facilities with the physical activity of young children, James N. Roemmich, et al.

xi Last Child in the Woods, by Richard Louv, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008

Education and the Environment Initiative - By Senator Fran Pavley

I was pleased to have an opportunity to stop and visit the MRCA's Interpretation program for children and the work they are doing employing the Education and the Environment Initiative (EEI) curriculum on Friday, May 18.

Senator Pavley with students

As a former middle school teacher, I am passionate about, and committed to, education and our children. It is because of my teaching background and strong position on environmental protection, that a few years ago when I was representing this area in the California State Assembly, I authored both Assembly Bill 1548 and Assembly Bill 1721.

The EEI curriculum was created to teach California kids about the environment and making these lessons a part of their everyday learning experiences in school. The EEI provides a basic understanding of the science, technology, history, economics, social benefits and impacts, and health consequences of our environment and how we treat it are crucial to the future of our children, our society and the planet.

I had envisioned this curriculum being the catalyst to engage teachers and students to learn more about the environment and tap into the many wonderful local resources available: classroom speakers, assembly programs, field trips to nature centers, aquariums, science centers and our state parks.

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority is actively doing this by utilizing the tremendous natural world we are so lucky to have around us. They are successfully engaging our children in real life lessons, connecting their classroom studies directly to what is happening around them in the Santa Monica Mountains. It was great to visit and see the EEI curriculum in action and thank you to the staff of the MRCA for all you are doing to help educate our children and promote an important connection that will live a lifetime for the children who participate in the MRCA program.

Hiking the ridge trail at King Gillette Ranch

Our naturalist staff, consisting of both year round and seasonal employees, act as teachers and interpretive guides for all the natural wonders for our Outdoor Education program. This group of exceptional outdoor educators come from all over the county and from a variety of backgrounds, including leading backcountry trail crews in New Mexico, teaching ski lessons, guiding teen backpacking trips in the pacific northwest and camp counseling in a foreign country for the US Military. All of our naturalists work towards the same goal - creating memorable experiences for the students that are fun and meaningful.

The Magic of Camp

An Insider's View of the MRCA's Outdoor Education - By Allie Balthazor

Students work together on a team building activity

Magic happens when reality exceeds expectations. When children arrive at King Gillette Ranch for outdoor education camp, they may be nervous or have negative preconceived notions. For some, it might be their first trip away from home and it can be slightly scary at first. Or they may have heard about an excruciatingly long eight-mile hike from older siblings who may have attended in previous years. My job is to shatter those negative expectations and introduce the outdoor world as a fun place to learn, have new experiences, encounter hands-on learning and nurture a future passion for the outdoors.

Coming to outdoor education might be like traveling to a different country for the first time. We greet each other with "haku", we are not constantly using computers and the resident naturalists have a strange affinity for wearing green every single day of the work week. All of which can be strange for a main stream, pop culture savvy fifth grader. Preconceived notions are different than the actual experience. Outdoor education camp is not truly experienced until

one is in the moment. When the unexpected happens, the potential for magic increases and it's our job as naturalists to create the magical moments.

As a seasonal naturalist at King Gillette Ranch, I get to witness a dramatic change in the students from day one to day five. The first day is the toughest, both on the naturalist and the children. The anxious children arrive in the foreign country of King Gillette Ranch, a little unsure what to expect. We greet them on the bus and tell them to respect nature, themselves and others around them. The students are introduced to all the counselors and naturalists. From there, they are divided into small groups, which is where the learning begins.

The first day, we start off with team building exercises, designed to put the students just slightly outside their comfort zone. These activities are lead by the naturalists who then lead a debriefing about what happened. The important part of team building is not completing the exercise, but how the team works together at solving the problem. We talk about the process of solving the problem in the debrief which sometimes leads to group discussions of deeper topics.

The children write in journals about expectations that we have of each other and also what we expect in our small group community. The schedule is also explained, meal times are given, upperclassman myths are debunked, and the children become slightly more relaxed in their surroundings.

By Tuesday, the fifth graders know the schedule and expectations, and group dynamics become smoother. Questions like "What time is it?," "When is dinner?" and "When can we go inside?" happen less often. Once the group dynamics change from a nervous bundle of anxious energy to calmness, then learning on an individual basis in new surroundings can occur.

With the outdoors as our classroom, the children participate in hands-on experiential learning during our curriculum-based lessons, which are tied to California education standards. In one of our lessons, the children learn about the Chumash Native Americans. They get to use musical instruments similar to the ones the Native Americans used. They learn not only about what a pump drill is and how it is used, but also get to make their own shell necklace with it. In the adaptation lesson, we talk about native wildlife, and the children get to feel the animal furs with their own hands. In the outdoor skills lessons, children form yet even smaller groups and build survival shelters out of fallen branches. In this exercise, groups are formed, ideas are thrown around, and in the end, incredible shelters are made - a product of teamwork, vision and small hands. All of this is done outdoors, free from modern technology. The outdoors is a level playing field for all types of students. For example, creative students can plan the shelters, book-smart students can identify plants and animals, and athletes can excel at the ecology related games. There really is something for everyone in outdoor education.

In the outdoor classroom, distractions are a good thing. In a traditional textbook based classroom environment, external stimuli may impair the learning process. An observant child is an asset to the group, because they may see things that the naturalist may miss. A distracted child may still be listening but be able to point out a great

A student shows off the shelter he built

Time to roast marshmallows around the campfire

natural sightseeing opportunity, like a blue heron hunting pocket gophers nearby. This creates an instant learning opportunity and teachable moment for the naturalist. The outdoor classroom environment creates opportunities for students who may not learn best with the traditional textbook based learning style. The outdoors allows experiential learners to excel. When a child has a moment they can relate back to and recall, they will remember a majestic animal and why it is so amazing and perhaps even keep that moment with them for life and inspire a passion for protecting the outdoor world.

I had the privilege of having a girl from Russia in my group. I was warned she was very quiet and I might not be able to understand her. However, I did not notice any of these traits. I noticed she excelled in the team building activities and directed the group. She loves all canines and was so excited to find out about Sirius (the dog star), hear coyotes at night and touch coyote fur. At the end she looked at me with her deep brown eyes and said, "Allie you have made me so happy. I touched a coyote! I love the coyotes. Thank you! Take my shell necklace so you will remember me." She put it around my neck. I was unintentionally involved in a magic moment for someone who struggles in a traditional environment but found something special at outdoor education camp. This is why outdoor education is so important, it gives opportunities to students who may struggle in a traditional school environment and allows them to utilize their individual learning style.

While contracting with the military last year to conduct a 10-week camp abroad, I was given advice by a retired Navy officer. He said, "You will experience the two worst days of your life when you work at a camp." The first worst day is when you begin camp and the children are getting to know you and their new surroundings. The second worst day is when camp is finished. Bittersweet good byes are exchanges and you may never see each other again. As a naturalist, I experience this weekly when I say goodbye to the children on Friday. The MRCA's naturalist and camp staff are creating magic moments that will stay with the children they educate and inspire stewardship of the environment.

Students touch coyote fur during the adaptation lesson with Naturalist Derek

Ava Gilani (right) as a 5th grader at LVUSD Outdoor Education camp

LVUSD teacher Ava Gilani (left) with a colleague at Outdoor Education Camp at King Gillette Ranch in 2012.

Back for Thirds

A Co-Director Perspective - By Ava Gilani, 5th Grade Teacher at Bay Laurel ES

As a graduate of Las Virgenes Unified School District, I have had the great experience of attending our Outdoor Education program as a 5th grader and as a counselor, during my senior year of high school. At the young age of 10, attending Outdoor Education camp was far beyond my imagination. I did not know what to expect, nor was I aware of what great memories would be created throughout those five short days at Cottontail Ranch. From the familiar camp environment to learning science in a whole new way, I am amazed by the ability of my 10-year-old self to grasp and retain all of this new information.

Upon entering my senior year at Agoura High School, I anxiously awaited spring time; not only would I be a second semester senior and college acceptance letters would be on their way, but I would also apply for a counselor position for outdoor school. I remember thinking about my own camp experience, as well as my counselor experience at summer camp, and I could not wait to show my group of 5th graders the beauty of an outdoor education.

Now, I am back for thirds as a teacher within the school district that had a strong hand in raising me. I can't help but look back to the day when I jumped at the opportunity to be the Co-Director for the Outdoor Education program now facilitated by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) at King Gillette Ranch. Now that the songs have been sung and tattooed in my memory, the food waste minimized, the early morning dance parties have come to an end, the 7-mile hike has concluded and the rich information has been learned, I feel it is imperative for all students to attend camp. Outdoor education, and specifically the Outdoor Education program at King Gillette Ranch with the MRCA, gave my students an opportunity to build the bridge

between their science textbooks and the world around them. For one of the first times all year, the 5th graders at Bay Laurel Elementary School were able to absorb all of the information that was thrown at them and easily regurgitate that information at a later time. These students were not only in awe of their skilled and talented naturalists, but were continuously talking about what their naturalists taught them, even after their time at Outdoor Education camp was over.

Beyond the classroom, the connections to state science standards, and even beyond the beauty of King Gillette Ranch and how it perfectly lends itself as a fantastic learning tool, I noticed a shift in the personalities of these students. One student especially stood out for me. This student is not your typical misbehaving student; he is brilliant and a wonderful athlete. However, he tends to call out in class and pick on those who are seen as "weaker" than him. Throughout the week at the Outdoor Education program with the MRCA, this 5th grader, with the guidance of his wonderful counselors, grew into a positive role model for his peers. He began helping his group members and was an asset to the team building component of outdoor school.

Upon his return to Bay Laurel, this student's personality took a turn for the better. Although his change was not a complete 180°, he has been making a continuous effort to follow the exemplary path that his counselors built for him. Outdoor education was the best thing that ever happened to this student, as well as his fellow 5th graders; it gave them the ability to stand a little taller, become a little more independent, and think about the world in a new way.

Students work together to complete a team building activity

For almost 30 years the MRCA has been providing outdoor education opportunities for students from Title 1 schools through the William O. Douglas Classroom at Franklin Canyon. For many students, this is their only field trip of the year, as well as their first adventure into the natural world. MRCA Volunteer Naturalist Geli Harris recounts her experiences on the trail with students during their visit to Franklin Canyon.

School Kids - Then and Now

School Programs at Franklin Canyon - By Geli Harris, Volunteer Naturalist

Ever wonder where the Native American kids went to school? Our kids today do. Twice a week, every week during the school year, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) offers free guided hikes at Franklin Canyon to low-income schools and special needs groups from all over Los Angeles. For a couple of really magical hours, these kids from concrete neighborhoods can experience what it might have been like to be a kid living in the Santa Monica Mountains before Europeans colonized the land.

For a child raised on TV and fast food, the thought of "living off the land" may seem rather unbelievable, but walking the mountain trails and being introduced to some of the native plants and animals quickly converts most of them into avid students of the past.

What did the Native American kids eat when they lived here? Where did they live? How did they learn to live off and with the land? What games did they play? What animals did they see? Which ones were dangerous, which ones did they hunt?

Answers to these and many other questions lay hidden along the trails of Franklin Canyon and by the shores of the lake and pond. Twice a week volunteer naturalists lead whole classrooms of kids "into the wild" to help them discover answers to these questions and whatever new questions the kids bring with them.

For children who have never been out of the City, this can often be a slightly scary experience, as they venture with us out into such a strangely foreign environment. But almost all come back excited about the new experiences they have

Students experience nature firsthand on the trails of Franklin Canyon

Volunteer Naturalist Margery teaches students about sycamore leaves

had and the new things they have learned.

Each Volunteer Naturalist has taken a 50-hour training course to equip them with the basic facts about the native plants, animals and ecosystems at Franklin Canyon. They are then encouraged to develop their own unique program for the kids, based on their individual interests. The result is that the visiting school kids get to take a two-hour hike with a guide who is passionate and well informed about their particular area of interest. The response of the school kids, their teachers and the accompanying parents is overwhelmingly positive. The most common refrain at the end of the hike is "WHEN CAN WE COME BACK??"

Many of the children come with a special goal in mind, they might want to see a bunny or a squirrel. Some want to see snakes and lizards. Pretty much all of them want to see the ducks, coots, frogs and turtles that live in our lake and pond. While seeing the land animals takes a little luck and a lot of quiet, we get to show them the water creatures on every hike. Frequent questions are: how did they get here, why are they here and who do they belong to? It is a wonderful opportunity to introduce them to the concept of public lands. One of my favorite things to do with the kids is to take them up to the top of an overlook where we can see most of the park and all the private homes ringing the top of the park. Then I ask them, "Who owns this park?" Their answers range from Ben Franklin to me. When they run out of guesses, I wait for the predictable puzzled silence and then point to the quietest or shyest kid in the group and say, "It belongs to him/her." Still puzzled, they all look at me and I keep pointing to other kids saying, "And him and her" until one or more of the kids yell out in great triumph: "IT BELONGS TO ALL OF US!!" And so it does. The joy of watching that register for them makes all the time and effort that goes into putting on a good program truly worthwhile.

Along with that sense of ownership, we try to instill in them a strong sense of stewardship. We tell them the story of Sooky Goldman and how, without her and all the people who helped her, there would be no Franklin Canyon that belongs to all of us, only more big houses and yards where none of us would be allowed to go. And then we tell them it is up to them, and all the other people this park belongs to, to take care of it and make sure it remains a public park for all of us to enjoy.

We often receive letters from the kids, telling us about what they learned and how much they loved going on the hike with us. The reactions range from really cool to life altering. We've certainly had our share of "I want to be just like you when I grow up" letters. While those feelings may pass with time, our hope is that by introducing these inner city kids to the wonder of our natural environment, we will help imbue them with a passion and sense of stewardship that will stay with them throughout their lives.

Free Field Trips in the Mountains

If you know of a Title 1 school or a group of students with special needs you think would benefit from this program, please have them call (310) 858-7272 ext 131.

Become a Volunteer!

If you would like to help change the world one kid at a time, please check out our volunteer opportunities by calling (310) 858-7272 ext 115.

Franklin Canyon

Nature Near our Concrete Jungle

By Juan Garcia, Teacher at Garfield High School

April 13, 2011 and November 10, 2011 have been memorable dates for over a hundred and seventy students at Garfield High School, which is located in the heart of East Los Angeles. In a collaboration between this humble teacher and the dedicated staff and volunteer naturalists from the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, inner city students had an opportunity to learn about the history and natural environment of our local mountains at Franklin Canyon.

The majority of our students in East Los Angeles rarely have an opportunity to experience our natural environment through hiking. Surrounded by concrete, freeways and traffic, over 90% of our students have never been to a natural park. A few only go to the beach once a year when the heat is intolerable in the inner city. On our first trip to Franklin Canyon, one student said, "Mr. is admission free?" I responded with a smile "Yes, you may visit with your family." So close to the city and yet so beautiful and peaceful, Franklin Canyon opens the eyes of many students to realize that being part of a natural world is closer than they thought.

But what is the value of this type of program for the students? I think the answers should come directly from them. Here are a few of their responses.

"I learned to value nature because it was my first hand experience that exposed me to things I would have normally not done on my own." -Krystal

"After the trip, I have noticed a positive change within students because we all seem to appreciate nature a lot more." -Rafael

"I liked it because it was an opportunity to relax and to forget about school and stress." -Selena

"Students pay much more attention when they have a hands on activity to learn about the healthy plants of our mountains." -Tony

"Viewing our world from an entirely different perspective is amazing. Having an experience like this with my classmates was a beautiful experience." -Tawya

"Students learn quickly at Franklin Canyon because they are in a stress free environment." -Marco

"I never experienced hiking, but this trip gave me a sense of freedom." -Brittany

"Nature brings out a different side of people that is more humane." -Elizabeth

"I recommend this trip because you gain a lot of knowledge, the guides have a lot of information and funny stories to share." -Maria

My students show me that we are all students. I decided to request the field trips because I knew they would appreciate it. In the classroom, we take notes, gallery walks, have PowerPoint presentations and debates, but nothing compares to an outdoor, interactive and meaningful experience. I relate the trip to social studies, because it incorporates part of the history of Los Angeles. The role of the volunteer naturalists are also important, showing students that happiness is not just material gains, but passion for what we love in life. These volunteers could spend their time doing countless other things, but have chosen to dedicate their time to teach inner city kids what they know about nature. I hope this program continues for many years because it does change the lives of inner city youth.

On December 6, 2011, high school students from Dominguez High School, located in Compton, loaded a bus and headed to Temescal Gateway Park. Not sure what to expect, they joined our Naturalist staff for a hike around the canyon. Along the way, the Naturalists introduced the students to the native plant and animal life, and gave a history of the park. After the hike and as an assignment for their English class, the students were asked to describe their experience. It is inspiring to read about the student's experiences in their own words.

An Unforgettable Trip to Temescal Gateway Park

In Their Own Words - By Students from Dominguez High School

"When we finally reached the top of the mountain, I could hardly believe my eyes. The view was astonishing! I was in awe of the simple beauty that surrounded me. Soft green hills encased me, I was not certain where they began or where they ended. I filled my lungs with the clean and pure air, a welcome change from the thick hazy air of the city. It was so quiet I felt as though the world existed only there and I was the only person allowed to witness that beautiful portrait of nature. It seems as though the many complications of life were so far away. I've never experienced a feeling like that before, the true feeling of tranquility." -Alexis Hooks

Students are excited to reach the top of the hill on the Loop Trail

"While hiking along the trail to the top of the mountain, I realized that there is a world outside the city of Compton. I encountered things that I have never seen in person. The sounds of nature are so tranquil and relaxing... My experiences from the hike at Temescal Canyon Gateway Park will never be forgotten. I am still in shock from the fact that I hiked for 2.875 miles and almost 2,000 feet high. Being taken out of the city of Compton and placed in an open environment was a learning experience in itself. I had learned that there is much more to life than the city. I am truly blessed to have gone on this life changing occurrence known as a field trip. Hiking on this trail, has edged me to look into more experiences, similar to this one. " -Kephon Wandix

Group picture of students from Dominguez High School during their visit to Temescal Gateway Park

"From the beginning of the hike to the end of the hike I was able to experience an event that I will never forget for the rest of my life. Participating in this event helped me explore the nature of the world and helped inform me of the different types of trees, plants, animals, and insects out there. This event also helped me and my body experience physical conditioning. I have experienced hiking before in other places like in Griffith Park, but nothing like Temescal Canyon. In the future I plan to come back to this wonderful place called Temescal Canyon and experience this again". -Jose Leon

For the past 4 years, the MRCA has been providing monthly programs to the students of Mariposa School of Global Education in Agoura Hills. Each month, we focus on a different natural topic that is first introduced during the classroom lesson, then further explored during an all-day field trip to a local natural park. This program, which culminates with the 5th grade class attending our Outdoor Education program, has become a huge success as discussed here by Jeff Lough, Principal of Mariposa.

It's Not About the Prius

Program with Mariposa School of Global Education - By Jeff Lough, Principal

It's not about the Prius. It's not even about the school recycle drive. These are distractions in the great scheme of why connecting our children with nature is so vital to their own development and, dare I say, the evolution of our species. So why does a school like Mariposa School of Global Education partner with an organization like the Mountains Restoration Conservation Authority (MRCA)? Why do our parents raise the money to have MRCA naturalists come into our classrooms to give lessons about the environment and lead our children on multiple hikes each year just like they would raise money for art, P.E., and music specialists?

I observe and teach children for a living. I am the school principal at Mariposa School of Global Education. I am also a Nationally Certified School Psychologist. Before becoming a psychologist, I was a classroom teacher. I am also a parent of three and a parent educator of hundreds. In my career I have found an increasing disconnect between children and the natural world. It is not a coincidence, that there has been a parallel increase in attention problems, hyperactivity, childhood depression, and pediatric health problems. In fact, it is not difficult (or absurd) to find a "nature camp" geared toward children diagnosed with AD/HD! While correlation is not causation, there is no shortage of research or literature linking these two phenomena.

Aside from what Richard Louv calls "Nature Deficit Disorder",

Mariposa students use sticks and leaves to create an animal home

there are also positive correlations between exposure to nature and desired qualities like creativity, stress reduction, and general health. My colleague, Dr. Paul Astin, and I often fantasize about an educational environment that tests such qualities as "empathy." We often laugh and say, "What a day it would be if the state of California penalized schools whose empathy scores dropped over the course of a year!" So what's empathy got to do with nature? Well aside from the actual existing research linking environmental education and empathy, I'll tell you a story.

Naturalist Ian leads a classroom lesson for students of Mariposa

It is not uncommon to hear a young child point out to her mother on a walk, "look at the pretty flower" (yes, it's more often a young girl). On one of our hikes with the MRCA, I was walking with our fourth grade class. As we walked, one of the students stopped, bent over, and called over a few of his friends. With great enthusiasm he said, "Check this out guys! It's a sticky monkey flower plant. Feel its leaves. Did you know that the Native Americans used its leaves as a band aid for cuts?" "Whoa, cool!" replied one of the boys.

While this brief interaction may seem trivial, this fascination with the natural world and the mere acknowledgement of the plant's common name exemplified a deeper connection with the natural world – an empathetic one. Moreover, this 10-year-old boy may not realize it just yet, but he has just been inspired and humbled by something bigger than him – a most valuable lesson that no teacher could have given him inside the walls of a classroom. Ultimately, what we have connection with as children, we will protect as adults.

This single example is just that – a single example. I can share many just like it. Through our partnership with the MRCA, our children are not only learning state standards through writing, hands-on lessons, keen observation, and exploration. The students at Mariposa are excited about the environment. Under the caring guidance of MRCA naturalists, they receive gifts from Mother Nature that will prepare them for the great work ahead of them – being fully awake human beings.

Students and staff from Mariposa with MRCA Naturalists at our annual cleanup event

Mountains Recreation & Conservation Authority
26800 Mulholland Highway
Calabasas, CA 91302

For more information visit:
www.lamountains.com
www.facebook.com/lamountains

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Let's G.O.! Events - 2012

MRCA Programs Part of National Campaign Designed to Get Children Outside

This spring, we were very excited to be a part of Children & Nature's Let's G.O.! (Get Outside) campaign. Children & Nature Network's mission is to connect all children, families and communities to nature. With their Let's G.O.! program, they encouraged others to host events to get people outside and into nature. In addition to our year-round public programs, we offered 4 events specifically aimed to create amazing outdoor adventures for all those who came.

Fun with sticks at King Gillette Ranch

Exploring trees and the creek at Temescal Gateway Park

Playing with tree cookies at Vista Hermosa Natural Park with Naturalist Derek