



Learning From the Elements

by Treven Hooker

On February 17, 2017, eight Arizona youth between the ages of 13-18 embarked on a spectacular wilderness adventure just outside of Kearny. These youth were participating in a project that was the first of its kind, combining youth from northern, central and southern Arizona together as a community. This adventure explored Arizona's brilliant Sonoran Desert, following the wild Gila River Canyons passage of the Arizona Trail.

On Friday, students and staff from Patagonia and Tucson arrived at the Gila River Trailhead around 7 p.m. where they waited for the northern AZ students to arrive later in the evening. Knowing the group would be tired once they arrived, eight tents equipped with sleeping bags and pads were set up and prepared for overnight camp. A fire was kindled using a primitive fire-making tool called a strap drill and after students practiced spinning a shaft of wood using deer hide, a beautiful fire was lit. Around its hot glow we snacked and laughed and a chessboard was brought to the fireside, making for lasting fun until the other students arrived.

When our group was finally all together, we greeted each other quickly. Around the fire, a discussion was held about our new community, and what type of attitude and perspective it takes to function in the backcountry. The group was attentive and excited. After our discussion, we embarked on a small night hike up a nearby arroyo. This was good practice, as each student found themselves dealing with a cactus needle or two. Once everyone had their fill of nighttime adventure, everyone wrapped up in their sleeping bags and fell fast asleep listening to owl calls and cricket chirps.

Morning came after a light drizzle. Moist air dampened the deep and fragrant smell of the canyon ragweed, which was a nice greeting to the first day of backpacking. After breakfast we began our preparation for our hike. We started off with a gear demonstration displaying all our gear in "like piles" in front of our backpacks. Each piece of gear was discussed for its importance and relevance to our trip, like sleeping gear and shelter, clothing layers, electronics, and other miscellaneous items. Once all questions were answered and students confirmed their understanding, we proceeded with phase two.

Students were instructed to place all their gear in front of their backpacks as demonstrated. Then, following the instructions set, they packed their bags in the order described. Two at a time, students paused during gear packing to organize and pack food. Sabrina created menus and recipes for each meal on each day. Students were walked through the process of nutrition and quantity, and why dehydrated food was useful when backpacking. Each student packed their meals according to the recipes, then packed the food into their bags. With pride, each student stood in front of their bags that had everything they needed for an adventure.





After gear was packed, I led a course on orienteering and navigation. With a compass in each student's hand, we went through the basics and the advanced workings of map and compass navigation. Students did an excellent job demonstrating their knowledge on using a map of the area. Our lesson was then cut short due to the call of the rain, of which seemed to be beckoning us to begin our adventure. Each student saddled their packs, adjusted straps, and with one foot in front of the other we began our adventure on the Arizona Trail. The trail ascended onto steep mountain slopes with lush Sonoran Desert foliage below.

As we wandered, our path met a train bridge. Students discussed how we relied on trains and the materials transported by them. They questioned if it was an invasive sight to our adventure. Some students found the bridge's appearance appealing, and thought it added to the wild feel of the landscape.

The rain continued to pour, but as the hours and miles ticked by it fell harder. Using map and compass, we triangulated our location and saw that we had traveled about five miles. In front of us a canyon stood tall and long, forcing the trail up the hills for another three miles. Based on weather and distance, we decided to find camp on the low valley floor for the night. Students led the way through an arroyo, dodging cactus and thick brush. The arroyo widened, leading toward the dark and muddy Gila River, where we found soft grassy bedding and minor shelter from leafless mesquite trees.

Students were instructed to set up their tents, attempting to keep everything as dry as possible. Once shelters were assembled, I hiked with two students to the bank of the river, where students were taught how to adequately process the water using a gravity filter. In short time, we found ourselves with enough water for the whole camp to hydrate and cook with. Students collected firewood, while Sabrina and I demonstrated different fire starting methods.



Our first try was with a strap drill and a large bundle of tinder. A strap drill uses a hard piece of wood between the teeth, pressing down on a short spindle. A strap of leather is wrapped around the spindle, which is used to rotate the shaft on a base piece of wood. This friction will cause an ember in less than ten seconds. Unfortunately, the bundle of tinder was too damp from the moist air, and the ember died as quickly as it came to life. Our second try was using less primitive methods. Using cotton balls, we dropped a dollop of hand sanitizer onto its frizzy surface and using a match watched it torch underneath our bundle of sticks. It took some nursing, but soon our fire was up to standard, and in a light sprinkle students and staff cooked dinner around the fire. Warm meals and laughter carried us till the fire lost its battle with the rain.

After we cleaned up, we retreated to our tents for warmth and relief from the rain. That night the rain was harder and longer than forecasted. Sabrina and I discussed how to proceed with the remainder of the trip. The rain had been so heavy it was making gear and clothes wet. Tomorrow was predicted to be equally wet, and we would be traveling through a narrow canyon to reach our destination. Due to the conditions, Sabrina and I decided it was a safety hazard to continue on our route, so we opted to hike back to our vehicles in the morning.

The rising sun was met with the thudding of raindrops on rain flies. Moisture soaked clouds filtered a grey light onto the landscape making it difficult to tell if a new day had truly come. On this rainy morning, the sun needed to make a strong case for itself before students could no longer ignore its rousing demand.



Each student emerged with a smile and a yawning stretch. With ponchos and rain jackets, we circled up in the middle of camp to discuss our decision to depart a day early. We were transparent, explaining our honest thoughts, conflicting feelings, and rational decisions. Our goal was to give the students an experience, but more so to prepare them for their own personal adventures. Teaching them risk management and objective decision making is a key lesson for outdoor development.

The students were reluctant to leave, but sympathetic to our decision. We discussed Leave No Trace ethics, then scoured every inch of our tracks picking up micro trash and all. We disassembled camp, filtered more water, and loaded our packs for the journey home. After a few moments of still air, the rain began again just as we were ready to depart.

The Sonoran Desert was in full bloom. On our hike, students marveled at flowers bright in vibrant colors of pink, yellow and white. Even desert lavender blossomed her humble purple petals, filling the air with rich aroma. We stopped often to discuss desert adaptations, pollinators, and the supreme biodiversity of the Sonoran Desert.

After a five-mile hike with steep up-hill climbs and a foreboding storm we made it to the vehicles. Students were instructed to unload all their gear as they did on the first day. Each piece was put in its respective place. Our actions and speed was dictated by the intensity of the rain, and with each passing second our speed increased. Sabrina and I decided a kitchen-cooked meal in the urban world was exactly what we needed. So, with thumbs up and a smile, we pulled away from the pristine landscape that gave us a true experience of the wilderness.

The winding road took us quickly through the desert and into the town of Superior. There we found a restaurant serving delicious Mexican food, making everyone drool with anticipation. We ordered, laughed, ate, shared stories, and laughed some more. Though we left a day early, each student had made a positive bond with each other, some even becoming close friends. As we were eating, we decided to go around and share what we loved, and what we hope to do next time. Everyone agreed that next time they would use everything they learned from their experience and finish the route. That determination and excitement to complete a mission was exactly what Sabrina and I wanted to instill; a deep hunger for self-sufficiency, strong teamwork, and adventure.

Our drive home was long, filled with music, laughter, then finally, sleep. Students were dropped off one by one, all leaving with a wide smile and an excited wave goodbye. The sun had left long before the last student returned home, and with clear skies and bright twinkling stars, our trip ended with a warmth greater than any camp fire. The flame of adventure had been lit, and will continue to rage until their feet hit the dirt again.



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