



Cleaning Up Coronado Cave

by Treven Hooker

On April 25, 2017, eight students from Bisbee High School and their teacher Nicole Baker woke on a calm spring day ready to begin a unique adventure within Coronado National Memorial.

This adventure was going to be different than most outings; instead of exploring the trails and canyons of the Huachuca

Mountains we would be experiencing what natural wonders exist underground. Our mission was to explore Coronado Cave and to remove modern graffiti that continuously plagues its walls. The short drive from Bisbee was spent soaking up the sun, absorbing the colors, and admiring the world before venturing into (and underneath) it.

When we arrived, we were introduced to National Park Service staff and volunteers who were going to help us navigate the cave and teach us how to properly remove unwanted markings. We strapped helmets and headlamps onto our heads, and carried buckets full of sponges, water, and brushes. Gear in tow, we hiked ½-mile up the trail, gaining elevation with every step. At the end of the trail, we stood in front of a large dark cavity.

A discussion of how we would navigate and stay safe within the cave was necessary, and once we agreed to the safety protocols we anxiously descended. The first portion of the cave was a steep, slippery path that required hands, feet, and total concentration. After 100 feet, natural light failed to travel any further, and a distinct line separating light and darkness could be seen. Without hesitation, students turned on their headlamps and the mission began.

First, we explored the cave with help from our fearless leaders. They explained how the cave and its many incredible formations (speleothems) came to be. Students observed dripping water that

continued to shape and form columns and ribs, deep tunnel carved by greater forces of water, and massive piles of boulders that separated during earthquakes. All of this gave a strangely organic and living feeling to this cave, reminding us that we were just inside a small pocket within a mountain.



Once our tour was over, we split into three groups. Two groups were set to tackle the large rooms in the cave, where then the third group navigated the smaller pockets.



I followed the small group and we progressed along on our bellies and backs, using small wiggles and army crawls as the most efficient method of movement. Narrow tunnels were littered with names, dates, and notes left from visitors as long ago as a few thousand years. Our goal was to remove graffiti that was left within the last 30 years. With water, brushes and sponges, we crawled hundreds of feet into tunnels, wedged ourselves into cramped positions, and brushed away.

After two hours of work, we emerged from the cave to eat lunch in the open. This shift from darkness to light was startling. Intense wind, light, and heat weighed heavy on us, a vast difference from the conditions underground. Once our bellies were full we returned to the cave, excited and ready for more subterranean adventure.

Entering a portion of Coronado Cave we encountered the narrowest tunnel yet. With a feeling of claustrophobia but a strong desire to explore, students squeezed themselves almost 60 feet down the crawlspace, dragging stomach and legs in tow to reach a small room. It was an accomplishment that took patience, confidence, and a lot of steady breathing.

After four hours of work it was time to depart. We walked down the trail and back to the Coronado National Memorial visitor picnic area where teacher Nicole Baker set up a feast for everyone. This outing marked the last of the semester, and we celebrated our explorations, commitment to stewardship, and the opportunity to experience the wilderness in our own backyard among friends.



This Seeds of Stewardship outing made possible by an Active Trails grant from



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Active Trails grants are funded through the generous support of the Coca-Cola Company and the Coca-Cola Foundation