



## Subterranean Stewardship

by Treven Hooker

On May 16, 2017, 12 students from Buena High School and their teacher arrived at Coronado National Memorial to adventure into the rugged Huachuca Mountains. This crew of students was eager to explore and help to clean up graffiti inside Coronado Cave. After introductions, the students could wait no longer and we bolted up the trail hungry for what adventures awaited us underground.

The day was warm, with a cloudless clear sky and intense sun. Only a few weeks before, the mountains were bombarded with thunder, lightning and rain. The rain was soaked up by everything in the desert, from rocks to rats. Our progress was interrupted by two red-tailed hawks that danced and flirted in the royal blue sky above our heads. I explained the traits of the Buteo, with broad shoulders and a wide tail.

The grade was steep, causing all of us to take deep breaths as we hiked along. We climbed into the dense oak woodland, following a drainage which eventually led to the mouth of the cave. At the entrance, we took a break to organize and snack. Once the group found comfort, we donned helmets and headlamps and began our descent into the heart of the mountain. For the first few hundred feet we used hands, feet and bottoms to scramble into the darkness.



Once we had fully grasped the size, history, and beauty of Coronado Cave, we set out with tools to clean it. We separated into two groups; one stayed in the open rooms of the cave while the other ventured into the narrow tunnels. Our equipment consisted of wire brushes, squirt bottles, and sponges.

Graffiti littered the walls of the cave. Some graffiti was as old as the native cultures that once traveled across Southern AZ, other graffiti was scratched yesterday. Our instructions were to erase the signs of anything created within the last 50 years. Using the wire brushes and water, we used circular rotations to break away the scratched graffiti. If markings were



particularly deep, cave dirt and water were mixed to make a thick pasty mud which we would spread across to camouflage the etchings.

In the narrow tunnels, we crawled on hands and knees, barely keeping our backs from scraping the ceiling. After 200 feet we stuffed ourselves into a crowded sitting position and began scrubbing. Even in these small and dark places, trash and graffiti found its way here. Hours passed as we scoured every inch of wall, searching for every unnatural marking. The youth found this work to be thrilling. Never before had they experienced crawling in the darkness, fighting claustrophobia, and stewardship all wrapped into one outing. Each shared their desire to return to the cave to protect it from further damage.

After three hours of cleaning we untucked from the cervices and emerged back into the sunlight. We were so caked in dirt and dust that it looked like we had been living in the cave for years. With buckets in hand and backpacks on our backs, we descended from the cave and hiked back to the visitor center. The students did an incredible job, removing a surprisingly large amount of graffiti.

This was Buena High School's first expedition into Coronado National Memorial, and the students were instantly hooked. Their adventure had been in a place most had never been, doing work they had never even considered, which resulted in a feeling like they never experienced before.



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



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