



Soaking Up the Silence of the Sky Islands

by Treven Hooker

On May 17, 2017, 12 students from Buena High School and their teacher arrived at Coronado National Memorial. It was a warm, clear day – perfect for exploring and outdoor education in the Huachuca Mountains. Our mission was to drive to Montezuma Pass to then hike north on the Arizona Trail. For most students, this was their first time on the Arizona Trail. This hike would give them sweeping views of the surrounding landscape, and a wonderful representation of sky islands.

After a short drive up the narrow road that leads to Montezuma Pass, we circled up and talked about trail etiquette, safety, and what things to keep an eye on. The students were very receptive to this information and eager to begin. It was prime snake season, and trails are wonderful locations for snakes to soak up warmth and hunt for prey. If we were lucky, we would spot one from a safe distance. The students were excited at the prospect of seeing wildlife.



This group surprised me with their pace, stamina, and focus. It was unlike any other group I had encountered this semester. Each student was interested in hiking, in challenging themselves, and discovering what was around the next bend. We stopped to examine some of the defining plants of this biome, looking blooming agave and their massive stocks that reach high into the sky. Sotol appeared like chess pieces over a playing board of yellow grasses. It was wonderful on the eye, but even better on the mind.

Students embraced our outdoor classroom, eager to soak up more information about the landscape. I asked them if any knew what a sky island was. When the answer was no, my excitement grew. I explained that sky islands are mountain ranges that rise sharply from low elevation deserts, like islands rising out of a sea of desert. The effect from such dramatic elevation gain provides a wide variety of biomes for unique plants and animals. Clearly defined lines draw contrast between grasslands, oak woodlands and pine

forests. I asked the students be keen in their observations for which biome we might be in at any time, and to notice the distinctions that tell them so.

As we were hiking our progress came to a halt as a large snake crossed the trail in front of the group's leader. Nobody screamed because they did not want to disturb the snake or risk sending the group into panic mode. I was proud of them, and excited for their discovery. I told the group to keep hiking and search for a good spot to lunch.

After another ten minutes, the students led us to a saddle with incredible views. Here, I encouraged the students to be intentional about how they ate. To eat alone is to bond with this landscape, ponder, and absorb nothing but your thoughts and environment. To eat with company is to share commune, laugh and rejoice in friendship, and create communal memories with a beautiful desert backdrop. The choice was theirs.

After we ate, I laid on my back to relax. To my surprise, everything became quiet. When I looked around I saw that everyone was quietly soaking up the serenity. It was the first time in my career that an entire group was seduced by the stillness of the landscape.

Reluctantly, we packed up and began our hike back down the AZT. The students reported a true bond with this place and vowed they would be back. The students fell in love with the hike, the landscape, and the incredible gifts that natural places have to offer.



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