

Senses in the Desert

Imperial National Wildlife Refuge is an oasis of life and learning for thirsty young minds.

By Betty Mulcahy

“How much farther do we have to go?” the girl behind me asks.

“How long do we have to walk?” her friend chimes in.

“This could be a very long hike,” I think as I lead 20 third graders along the Painted Desert Trail at Imperial National Wildlife Refuge north of Yuma, Arizona. The trail is just over a mile, and we’ve barely begun.

“We have quite a ways to go,” I tell the girls.

“Good! Because this is *so* fun!”

Big cities offer many choices and opportunities that are unavailable in a remote town the size of Yuma. Children from Yuma have no zoo and few museums. Their connection with nature is limited, and they may be only vaguely aware of its significance. They may live *in* the desert, but they don’t *live* the desert.

Imperial National Wildlife Refuge offers the chance to experience what these children learn in the classroom. Today we are awakening their senses to the desert that surrounds them.

“We’ll look for signs of water,” I told the hikers before we stepped onto the trail. But when I asked them what those signs might be, they merely stared at me.

Now we stop at a dry wash striated by occasional water flow. I ask if anyone sees signs of water. Several point to the cracked dried mud. “That’s right. And what about erosion on the hillside? Does anyone know what erosion means?”

“We’ve discussed this in class,” the teacher is quick to remind the pupils as they peer up at the deep grooves, beginning to connect what they’ve only read or heard about with what they are now witnessing.

We walk down a wash to a wide, flat space populated with cactus, creosote, palo verde, and numerous other plants. As I cup my hands around a creosote branch, breathe on it and inhale, I invite the class to join me. The children surround the bush and inhale the acrid odor.

“It smells like rain!” several announce. They know from experience something I had to learn on my first trip to the desert. I smile at their discovery. When I ask why none of the plants have large leaves, they eagerly recall what they’ve learned at school. It’s becoming real for them.

One young girl brings me a leaf she has plucked from a brittlebush. “Why is this soft?” she asks. The bush will regrow the leaf, but it has piqued the girl’s curiosity. She is paying attention to details.

“As we walk, let’s look for holes where animals live,” I tell the group. Intrigued, the students locate a hillside riddled with various sized and shaped burrows.

“There are some tracks!” one declares after investigating the entrances to these homes. Increasingly, the children are honing their observation skills. They begin seeing signs and details that I miss. And I begin to understand why people teach. Igniting excitement and awareness in these students has augmented my own senses.

“Now see if you can count the number of colors in the rocks as we walk,” I say. Soon we stop again to investigate the different shades. They come up with “reddish-orange” and “pinkish-brownish-whitish” and “purple-maroon” and “green.” One child comes up with “blue.”

“Blue?” I ask. But then I realize that some of the dark gray could appear blue. I’ve learned something.

After climbing a steep incline, we stop at the highest point of the trail. “Does anyone see a sign of water in the distance?” I ask.

Answers of erosion and caked mud abound. “Look farther,” I insist. “Way in the distance.”

“It’s green,” one child offers.

Then someone spots the ribbon of blue. “That’s the Colorado River,” I say. “If you were a bighorn sheep, that’s where you’d have to go for a drink. How many of you would want to travel that far just to drink?” Most shake their heads. One, however, offers to walk the six hilly, rocky miles right now. I admire his enthusiasm.

When we descend again to the wash, I ask the group to sit on the gravel. “Close your eyes and listen,” I say. “Each time you hear a different sound, hold up a different finger.”

I give the children one minute of silence with their eyes closed. It must seem an eternity, but not one makes a sound except for an occasional foot crunching the little stones. “Open your eyes,” I say when time is up. “What did you hear?”

One child heard an insect buzzing in her ear. Another heard the wind through the trees. Still another heard an airplane in the distance. “I heard a lion roar,” one proclaims. I don’t dispute it. Imaginations have been sharpened this morning.

We're coming to the end of the hike, and I have heard few if any complaints. "I want to stay here," one boy says.

"Aren't you hungry?" his friend asks.

"Yes. But I'd rather stay here than eat." I don't try to hide my satisfaction. Making a difference in a child's life, I find, also makes a difference in mine.

Now the children are continually pointing out signs of water and animal burrows and colors in rocks. They are excited with their discoveries.

When we round one more hill, the parking lot comes into view. A boy in front of the line marches toward the bus. "This is the most funnest field trip I ever been on!" he declares. "Even better than Sea World!"

I wonder if this child has ever been to Sea World. Nevertheless, I stop him long enough to give him a hug. This is one of the most funnest things I've ever done too!

Chattering with new awe, the children board the bus. I may have awakened their senses, but they have awakened my sense of wonder.

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