

Outdoor Education Series—Yosemite 5th Grade

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”

—John Muir



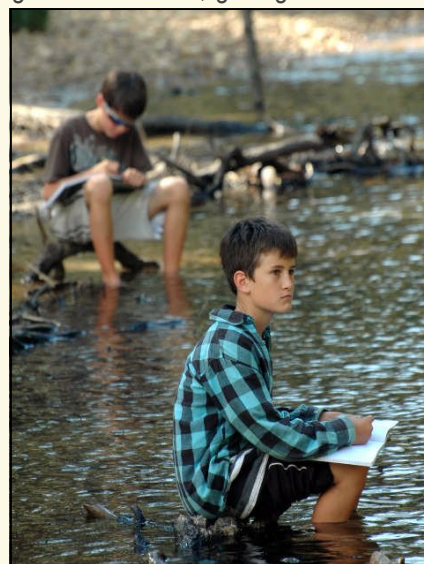
“You have to know about something before you want to protect it. Knowing is the key to caring.”

—Sylvia Earle, Chief Scientist of the
National Oceanic and
Atmospheric Administration

Why Outdoor Education? - by Rick Betz

“Seek balance, not just for yourself, but for everything in your world. Ground yourself in kindness so that when you act, it will be for the betterment of all and not just yourself.”

While sitting atop Sentinel Dome in Yosemite National Park, I was observing my fifth graders surveying the beauty around them. It was then that I was approached by an older gentleman who was curious about our group. I told him that we were there for a week, camping in the Valley and spending our days hiking, exploring, observing, and studying nature. He was thrilled to hear that our school had outdoor education as a significant component of the children's education. I told him it was much more than that. I told him that while nature deficit disorder is a national concern, these trips go much deeper. It is not enough, I said, to just be in nature, though, to be fair, that in itself is a powerful experience. But what begins by getting to know nature, getting familiar with her moods and her secrets, slowly, with careful guidance, turns into a life long caring for nature and the environment. And while our planet will not survive without caring individuals looking after her, this is not what I love best about our outdoor education program. I told him I love to see the children



a deeper understanding of themselves as they consider and reflect on what part of nature resonates with them.

In writing exercises I ask the children to explore the various characteristics of the mountain, or the tree, or the water, and apply those same characteristics to themselves. The delight I experience when the children read their journals and the light of self-knowledge shines in their eyes, is indescribable. Perhaps it is this that fires my own inspiration for teaching. There is nothing quite like taking children into nature and guiding them to not only appreciate and care for the earth, but to appreciate and care for themselves and each other.

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Outdoor education dovetails beautifully with the science curriculum. In Yosemite, the fifth grade was able to apply in the field what they learned in the classroom. They were able to actually see the Horsetail and Fiddlehead ferns growing side by side. They were able to touch and compare various lichens with various mosses. They were able to actually smell a Jeffrey Pine and distinguish it from a Ponderosa by the scent of butterscotch given off by the puzzle-shaped bark.

When academic studies are complemented with being in nature and interacting with living environments you can see, in the faces of the students, how the information, made alive by experience, begins to transform into knowledge. It is a pivotal part of the learning process and I am so happy to be in a school that encourages this relationship between outdoor education and classroom study.



Students' Perspectives

Travel Journal—Kassidy Ford

Today we went on a short walk and saw lots of gargantuan trees. The Jeffrey Pine smelled like butterscotch and vanilla.



We got to the Merced River. The view was amazing. The water looked like ice sliding down the rock. The steam coiled snake-like in the air. The water, foamy white, looked like Santa Claus's beard. I could stare at it forever. The water was

crystal clear, pretty much. I think the water was about three-and-a-half feet deep. The rocks were speckled with white granite. Some were striped with it, looking like it was wearing a striped t-shirt. The moss on the rocks looked like green stubby whiskers. Green stubby whispers, to be exact. I wish I had gotten more pictures of the ice-like, beard-like, snake-like, crystal-like, t-shirt, whisker-like scenery.

Do you ever think you are a rose? Or maybe you're quick like a lily? Surprisingly, humans and plants are somewhat alike. There

are two different kinds of flowering plants, monocotyledons (monocots) and dicotyledons (dicots). Lilies are monocots and roses are dicots. If you are quick, fast and simple, flying from one thing to the next, you are like a lily. Lilies grow quickly, shooting up, not waiting for any details, love drinking water, and have very green, straight, simple stems. But if you are slow, and love taking in the details, and are calm, patient, taking in little things so carefully, you are more like the rose. Whatever you are, a quick lily or a snailish rose, even though they are both just flowers, they are very different in their own special way, just like humans.

