

# Conservationists Help Kids Go Buggy for Bugs

By Jennifer Wake



Insect Discovery Lab education specialist Emily Geiges shows children a Malaysian Rainforest walking stick  
Photo Jennifer Wake

Nearly thirty children sat attentively on the floor of the Moraga Library last Thursday, waiting for a chance to do something that might make some parents cringe: Let a two-inch long hissing cockroach crawl over their hands.

The visit was part of an effort to enlighten kids to the mysterious world of bugs and promote conservationism for their habitats. Education specialists from the Center for Ecosystem Survival brought Australian walking sticks, Madagascar hissing cockroaches, giant African millipedes, and California darkling beetles to the library as part of their Insect Discovery Lab program.

Presenters Trent Davis and Emily Geiges said they bring their bugs to 700 different locations throughout the greater Bay Area each year with the hope of teaching children about the wonder of these creatures. It is also a way to promote their "Adopt an Acre" program, which raises funds to purchase and protect critical ecosystems for endangered species of plants and animals in the tropics.

"There are 1.7 million kinds of bugs named in the world, but scientists think there are 50 to 100 million yet to be discovered,"

Geiges told the children. "We're trying to save the ecosystem these animals live in."

Children sat quietly as the presenters gently placed the creatures on patient, open hands. As the children (and some bold parents) held the creatures, they were told of all the wonderful things they do for the environment, such as removing waste, fertilizing the soil, and even dining on dead animals that could otherwise decay and spread disease. The specialists also explained some common misconceptions that often lead to fear of these creatures.

"People think cockroaches are dirty, but they are actually very clean creatures," Geiges said as she gently held a large hissing cockroach in her fingers. "People see them on food or near garbage, but they're just coming out to eat."

When asked why a child's bug fascination can turn to bug revulsion, Geiges said parents play a key role. "If mom is screaming at a spider, it sends a message to the child," she said. "Parents need to keep their minds as open as possible. Children look to you for an example."

Keeping an open mind about our local insects can be beneficial as well.

Gary Dorrington, who works at McDonnell Nursery in Orinda, believes we should be focusing our attention on bees.

"I can't stress enough how important it is to educate ourselves about bees. People tend to lump bees with yellow jackets, wasps, and hornets," Dorrington said. "Wasp and yellow jacket traps kill honeybees as well. But honeybees aren't going to harm someone unless someone touches them, and they'll die after they sting you, so there's your solution."

A handout written by the Walnut Creek Garden Club entitled "Save the Bees," offered at Orchard Nursery in Lafayette, states that if honeybees die off, scientists predict that two-thirds of our food would either be gone or become so expensive that no one could afford it.

University of California at Berkeley researchers were alarmed to find that commercial honeybee populations have dropped precipitously in recent years, from 4 million to 2.4 million, and wild bee species are also plummeting. Pesticides may play a role in the reduction of wild species, since many sprays are "non-selective" and kill

good bugs (soldier beetles, lady beetles and honeybees) as well as the bad.

The Garden Club suggests using insecticidal soaps rather than pesticides and landscaping with plants that will attract honeybees, native bees and other pollinators: borage, coreopsis, marjoram, thyme, lavender, rosemary, single roses and hyssop. "Most bees like open flowers to land on. Bees especially enjoy rosemary, as well as most flowering plants and trees, such as apple, almond, lemon and orange trees."

"Rosemary and lavender make honeybees very docile," Dorrington added.

The Insect Discovery Lab, through its education programs, hopes parents and children will learn the key role these insects and other arthropods have in the web of life, and make life decisions that make a difference.

Whether understanding more about the honeybees of your backyard garden or the mammoth insects of the rainforest, there will always be a fascination between children and bugs. "Be eco-heroes with me," Geiges said.



Children hold unique bugs as part of Insect Discovery Lab presentation at the Moraga Library  
Photo Jennifer Wake