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Campo students trailblaze new pathways into nature

Submitted by Laura Kindsvater



Save Mount Diablo is inventing new ways to connect young people to nature by keeping students safe as they get outdoors during the pandemic and learn together about the natural world. "Kids get it," said Ted Clement, Executive Director of Save Mount Diablo. "They know how to adapt. So when we had to change the way we deliver our experiential Conservation Collaboration Agreement education program, they and their teachers took up the challenge and are making it work."

Campolindo High School and Save Mount Diablo have successfully completed Conservation Collaboration Agreements (CCAs) before. In 2018 and 2019, Campolindo students took part in Save Mount Diablo's traditional multi-day CCA program of classroom and outdoors learning experiences. Now, this year's class of 150 AP Environmental Studies students is casting a new mold shaped to the demands of social distancing and, for

now, shuttered classrooms.

They have a high standard to meet: Previous classes participating in the program seriously boosted their knowledge levels and intentions to spend more time outdoors. This is important because youth today "spend less time outside than prison inmates, with the average child playing freely outside for just four to seven minutes a day," according to a 2017 report commissioned by REI Co-op, The Path Ahead. This report notes that the average American now spends about 95% of their life indoors. It further reports that we are becoming an "indoor species," which comes with consequences: "Our health and well-being may suffer. And the less we value our outdoor spaces, the less likely we are to protect them."

Each Conservation Collaboration Agreement has three basic parts, starting with an in-class presentation by SMD staff introducing students to Mount Diablo land conservation. This year, to keep students safe, SMD gave a Zoom presentation instead.

For the second part of the agreement, students typically spend a full day outdoors. They go on an interpretive hike led by a trained naturalist and SMD staff, complete a nature service project such as planting native grasses, hear a local ecology lesson, and conclude with a solo writing exercise reflecting on their part in nature. But nature intervened with a surprise windstorm that made outdoor time on the planned day too dangerous.

Undaunted, everyone quickly pivoted to Plan B. Instead of the usual program, students were able to choose a project, do a contemplative solo, and complete both on their own in the outdoors near their homes. Save Mount Diablo provided guidelines and suggestions for projects.

Students' projects ranged from gathering and planting acorns, to transforming trash into art, to cleaning out the gutters on a neighborhood street. The class described their solo experiences, and some shared their journal entries. One commented, "I went up on this hill behind my neighborhood. It was completely silent. It gave me a chance to think. ... My role in nature is to enjoy it but more importantly to protect it."

Tren Kauzer, one of the participating Campolindo High School teachers, stated, "With distance learning, students have been spending countless hours in front of screens. By partnering with Save Mount Diablo, Campolindo AP Environmental Science students had the opportunity to experience a respite from screen time, a moment to quiet their minds and recharge in nature during these stressful times."

In the final portion of the CCA program, designed to engage students in educational and participatory philanthropy, the class worked to raise funds to become members of SMD through SMD's discounted youth membership program.

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