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UNTOLD STORIES DISCUSSION GUIDE

CITY KIDS IN NATIONAL PARKS

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City Kids in National Parks

Las Vegas, Nevada: Where you can walk from the Great Pyramid to the Eiffel Tower, lose your nest egg or hit it big, and still make it to the breakfast bar before closing time — because there is no closing time. From space, it is the brightest city on earth.

At 5:00 AM on a Saturday morning in January, on a hillside overlooking the bright lights of the Strip, a few dozen seventh graders and their parents arrive at the parking lot of Bailey Middle School. The students are about to spend a weekend in Death Valley National Park, one of the quietest places on earth — and the hottest, the driest, the lowest, and, on a moonless night, the darkest. It is a place of extremes — and a place where the students will learn first-hand about the Mojave Desert in which they live. For many of them, it will be their first time away from the city.

This is a brand-new education program that we’ve named Death Valley ROCKS. We are trying to take kids from inner-city areas and get them in here — get them playing, being part of the area, interacting, and learning. So the idea is to incorporate them having fun, being comfortable with the out of doors, but also learning a lot about it. — Nancy Hadlock, Former Death Valley Education Specialist

The program at Death Valley is new, but the idea is not. The National Park Service has been introducing young people to wilderness for decades, primarily through youth education programs in its 391 parks, monuments, and sites nationwide. The programs range in size from the large institutes at Yellowstone, Yosemite, and other parks — where tens of thousands of students are served each year — to Death Valley, where in January 2008, the program’s inaugural season, just 72 lucky students were able to participate.

One of the first organized NPS education programs was at Biscayne National Park, a few miles off Miami’s urban shoreline in the shallow waters of Biscayne Bay.

Biscayne National Park has an education program that has been in existence since 1976. The resources that we have out here are just amazing. It’s 95% water, so the classroom is actually in the park.

We target students throughout South Florida. We take the students out of the classroom and bring them to the actual ecosystems: the mangrove shoreline, Biscayne Bay and its seagrasses, the islands with its hardwood hammock, and even out to the coral reef. — Maria Beotegui, Biscayne Education Specialist

Educational activities at parks throughout the NPS system are open to students of all ages, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds, and offer everything from day programs that last and hour or two to week-long wilderness immersion experiences. Many are aligned with state academic standards, making it easy for teachers to incorporate into their lesson plans. In recent years, special emphasis has been placed on bringing kids from America’s urban inner cities into the parks.

1 In 2008 Nancy Hadlock left Death Valley to become Education Specialist at Manzanar National Historic Site.
The youth we wanted reach were the inner-city youth. These are the kids that don't normally have an opportunity to visit places like this, or even have an opportunity to enjoy the out of doors. — James T. Reynolds, Former Death Valley Superintendent

When you watch kids that can be impressed by just the sound of silence; when you watch kids who can be impressed with the idea of seeing the Milky Way to the point that it silences them — It’s powerful; it’s powerful. That’s why we work with the inner-city kids. — Nancy Hadlock

The push to get kids into natural areas has intensified in the past few years in efforts to counteract the growing phenomenon known as “nature-deficit disorder.” Research indicates that an increasing majority of children are disconnected from the outdoors, preferring to spend their days inside—in front of televisions, computers, or electronic gaming devices. “I like to play indoors better,” Paul, a fourth grader in San Diego, told Richard Louv, “’cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are.” Citing numerous studies, Louv, author of Last Child in the Woods, links the lack of outdoor experiences to rises in childhood obesity, attention disorders, and depression. Direct exposure to nature, he and others argue, is critical to healthy childhood development (Louv 10; 32–34).

The creation of these programs is also critical to the future of the National Park Service. Attendance at the nation’s large western parks has dropped in recent years, sometimes dramatically: Yosemite attendance has fallen 16% since 1996; visitation peaked at the Grand Canyon in 1991 and at Yellowstone in 1992. Camping in parks has dropped significantly, especially among people younger than thirty (Louv 147).

For most of the students, this is a completely new experience. Less than 10% of the kids that are here have actually camped before, which means like six or seven kids. They have no idea any of this is out here. — Nancy Hadlock

The trend, however, is not irreversible. A California survey indicates that more than eight out of ten campers became interested in the outdoors when they were children, a fact that is not lost on NPS officials. “This is a way for us to reach many more of the constituents,” James Reynolds predicts, “that we know will be necessary to protect Mother Earth—and to make sure National Parks are forever” (Louv 148).

In Las Vegas, the students at Bailey Middle School are from lower- to middle-class families, and many of their parents work at casinos. “They have odd shifts, so the parents aren’t always home at certain hours,” says science teacher Beverly Lousignont, “and a lot of my students don’t get the experience to go camping.” Lousignont, who camped frequently as a child and wanted to share that experience with her students, was happy to sign on as the first teacher to participate in the Death Valley program.

Lousignont also hoped the trip would pique the students’ interest in science and, as a result, raise their science grades—in a school where 68% or more of them regularly test below the score necessary to meet the “No Child Left Behind” standard (Bailey Middle).

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2 James T. Reynolds retired in January 2009, after nearly 40 years in the Park Service.
In class, we studied geology in the fall. The rangers came out three different times to our school. They did activities about the rock cycle and the different geology in the park. So this went right along as a culminating experience—“Wow! This is what we've been doing, and this is what we've been reading about.” — Beverly Lousignont, 7th Grade Science, Bailey Middle School

Parks like Death Valley provide the students with an opportunity to experience that science—and other subjects—first hand, in a way that is not possible in a classroom environment.

We want this to be a place where they can learn a whole lot better than being in a classroom. You can have hands-on with Mother Nature. You can have hands-on with geology, you can have hands on with hydrology, and then at the same time you can have hands-on with history. So what better place to learn all of those subjects than in the places where they occur? — James T. Reynolds

The opportunity to learn in a real-world setting is something parks offer teachers who want their students to get excited about science in a way that has not happened for them in the classroom.

This is all new to them: being in a boat, seeing blue crabs with eggs on it, seahorses, horseshoe crabs. It just opens their eyes to another world. — Maria Beotegui, Biscayne Education Specialist

But what the students learn once they’re in the park goes beyond biology, geology, and history.

I want the students to walk away with the education of the geology and the meteorology and knowing the different environments—and how this is the Mojave Desert and they live in the Mojave Desert. But the other thing that I want the students to take away is growth in themselves—that they can do things and that they’re independent. — Beverly Lousignont

In a typical overnight educational program, like at Death Valley and Biscayne, the students are responsible for much of the work—pitching their own tents, cooking their own meals, and cleaning up their campsites. For older kids involved in more intensive wilderness immersions, students are expected to pack all their equipment and supplies in and out on their own backs, often hiking for many miles between campsites—and then to summit 10,000-foot peaks on the days in-between.

At Death Valley, the seventh graders have it a little easier, but the goals are the same: gaining real-world knowledge of how to survive in and interact with nature, and becoming self-sufficient and self-confident.

Tonight, the kids are gonna be setting up camp. Experience is the best teacher. If their tent isn't done quite right and it comes down in the middle of the night, the only one they’re gonna be able to blame is themselves. It's a great, wonderful learning experience. — Nancy Hadlock
The emphasis on self-esteem building is a stated goal of most educational programs in the parks, not just a by-product of the experience. At Death Valley, rangers purposely challenged the students with a steep hike down—and back up—Ubehebe Crater.

"Part of the goal of this is to build self-esteem. Some people would say, "Taking the kids down in there—couldn’t that be dangerous?" There are all sorts of objections; but then you see their faces when they’ve climbed out of it. I think for them it was a great big accomplishment." —Nancy Hadlock

Bailey Middle School teacher Beverly Lousignont concurs. "It was a moment," she says, "for THEM—to see them grow within themselves—once they finally got up to the top, just to look down and say, ‘I did it!’"

For Louis Rabassa, a fifth grade teacher at Campbell Drive Elementary in Homestead, Florida, the issue was not so much self-confidence, but teamwork and trust. Homestead is a densely-populated urban center just south of Miami, equidistant between Biscayne and Everglades National Parks. 44% of its population under the age of 18 is below the poverty line. The school consistently fails to meet the No Child Left Behind standards, and the students—even at this young age—are involved in gangs and drugs (Homestead; Campbell Drive).

"These kids do not have a sense of camaraderie; they don’t have any type of loyalty or aspirations to anything in life. They're not exposed to things. All they know is their neighborhoods—the crack dealers, the drug dealers, the pimps and all of these people who they look up to, because they don’t know anything outside of that." —Luis Rabassa, 5th Grade Teacher, Campbell Drive Elementary

Through a series of trust-building exercises, combined with working in teams in canoes, in the on-site marine lab, and on night-time hikes, the protective shells the students have put up around themselves gradually fall away.

"They don’t get a chance to come together and work as a team very often. Everything to them is very competitive. They don’t like working together; they don’t like trusting each other. So coming here gave them an opportunity to work on all these different activities that required them to come together and achieve a goal." —Luis Rabassa

The satisfaction a teacher like Mr. Rabassa feels when goals he thought to be unattainable are reached is unparalleled.

"It was really awesome to just see them work together and trust each other — because they don’t! And at first they were very apprehensive about letting go and putting their safety in somebody else’s hands.

When they’re exposed to these types of activities and see that they CAN work together—and not have to be working against each other—it gives them a different outlook on life and we can expect different things from them." —Luis Rabassa

The programs in the parks are aimed not only at working with teachers to ensure that standards are met, but also to ensure that every child has a chance to participate.
There are students that need to be challenged in different ways. Out here, we have students that never talk in the classroom and all of a sudden they're taking the lead. So we are providing students with a different method by which to learn. And this is opening up their world, their appreciation of learning. And who knows where this will lead them in the future? —Maria Beotegui

The impact the programs have, and the number of lives they touch and alter, is impossible to ascertain, but nonetheless is certain.

We're finding right now the largest dropout rate is actually in middle school, not high school; they don't even make it to high school. If this makes a difference in one kid's life, then it's important. —Nancy Hadlock

And the impact these students, in turn, might have on the earth is just as impossible to predict, but potentially just as profound.

We care. Somebody has to care. WE care. And as we teach these young people how to treat Mother Earth, maybe they'll do better than we have. And let's just hope that a couple of generations down the road, Mother Earth will be a whole lot better off than it is today. Maybe our generation doesn't have the will. But maybe these kids WILL have the will. —James T. Reynolds

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Resources Cited

