

COMMUNITY CONSERVATION: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES THROUGH LAND CONSERVATION

PALOS VERDES PENINSULA LAND CONSERVANCY

Connecting Young People with the Land



Photos courtesy of Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy

Right next door to the second largest city in the United States lies the 1,400-acre Palos Verdes Nature Preserve. Thirty miles of Pacific coastal trails wind through the preserve, which is composed of 10 individual reserves to maximize benefits to wildlife and vegetation. While it's the largest coastal nature preserve between the Santa Monica Mountains and Newport Beach, many residents in nearby Los Angeles have never been on the land, nor have they seen the Pacific Ocean.

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The Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy, which protects and manages the preserve, is doing something to change that. Through innovative school-based and community youth programs, it is connecting people to the land, many of whom are at-risk youth who live in underserved urban neighborhoods. Two of their programs, Third-Grade Naturalist Program and Science Students as Stewards, work with local elementary schools to provide students with hands-on science education and nature experiences. The organization also regularly collaborates with high school students, empowering them through their involvement in creating positive environmental change within their community.

INNOVATIVE SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS

Thanks to the conservancy, more than 3,000 students are brought out to the preserve each year to engage in conservation education tied to the California state standards for science curriculum (soon to be the Common Core). The Third-Grade Naturalist Program is the longest running of the conservancy's educational programs. During the course of five sessions, trained docents lead four in-class, interactive discussions on the natural history of the area. The final session takes place on the preserve, where students embark on a nature walk and apply their newly acquired knowledge in the field. "This 17-year-old program is in every school in our geographic area and has also expanded into the



Los Angeles Unified School District, in which approximately half the schools are Title 1 schools serving primarily disadvantaged students," says Andrea Vona, executive director of the conservancy.

A second program, Science Students as Stewards, provides students in grades K–6 with exposure to the land in meaningful ways that foster stewardship and connection with the natural world. For the past five years, the conservancy has been working mainly with teachers and students from Para los Niños Elementary School, a charter school in downtown Los Angeles. On the preserve, students participate in dynamic science lessons, leading their

own investigations and experiments, collecting information and exploring. "We've heard from teachers that the program has had a very positive impact on student learning by making science more tangible to them," says Vona, "and this has been reflected in greater student engagement and higher test scores."

The exposure to the natural world also has immeasurable benefits. Although the students do not live far away from the preserve geographically, many of them have never left their densely populated neighborhoods, so the sights and sounds of the coastline are new experiences for them. "Once some students were exploring a tidal zone

and the waves were crashing on the beach, and one student thought it was gunshots," Vona explains.

Funded by both grants and private contributions, this program provides conservancy staff guides to students and teachers. The program is in the process of expanding, however, to offer fee-based guided programs and a free self-guided component for all schools and homeschooled interested in visiting the conservancy's two nature centers and the adjacent preserve. "Students sometimes ask if the preserve is a place they can come back to," Vona says. Staff members encourage the students to return with their families and some of them have. Several major thoroughfares connect Rancho Palos

"These programs are a way to share these lands with the future generation, to inspire stewardship and to help them understand that these are their lands. Hopefully, they'll then care for the land as adults."

— Andrea Vona, Executive Director, Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy



Verdes, where the preserve is located, to Los Angeles, and public transportation is also available.

COLLABORATIVE EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS

In addition to running its own programs, the conservancy regularly collaborates with other organizations that serve at-risk youth, empowering them through environmental stewardship. One such organization is the Cindy and Bill Simon Technology Academy High School, known as "Simon Tech." Located in Watts, an LA neighborhood with a turbulent history, this forward-thinking school affords students with a hybrid learning experience that emphasizes strong character, critical thinking and collaborative skills, all qualities they bring to their service-learning projects on the preserve. Funded by Audubon's Toyota TogetherGreen Program and led by the conservancy's Stewardship Associate Adrienne

Mohan, this project inspires students, 90 percent of whom are Latino, to become more involved with conservation by introducing them to California open space.

On Saturdays for the past year, anywhere from 30 to 50 students have been taken out to the preserve, where they participate in such projects as propagating native shrubs in the on-site nursery. They then plant the shrubs, which support pollinator species on the conserved land. "The students are learning about ecorestoration, which they can then bring back to their neighborhoods," says Mohan. "Plus, they enjoy just being at the beach and learning what it is to be a California native." The students, who are part of Simon Tech's Audubon YES (Youth Environmental Stewards) Club, plan to plant some of the shrubs on their campus in the fall and to establish an edible landscape at the school as well, to entice more students to join in.

The conservancy also partners with other local high schools through its HERO Club (Habitat/Environmental Restoration Organization). It recently transformed an acre of land on the preserve that had become overrun with invasive plants into habitat for the endangered Palos Verdes Blue Butterfly. Students aided in the recovery of the butterfly species by replacing the invasives with 400 native plants and then helping to release butterflies that had been raised in captivity into the habitat. "We get a lot of involvement from high schools throughout the area. It's a great way to make a positive impact on the land and have a youth component in our organization," Vona says. "We hope that even if a particular program is short term, there's still a long-lasting impact on the student body and our relationship with the schools."

FIND MORE

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