

SAND CANYON ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAM

Sand Canyon Environmental Education Program (SEEP) is a community-based program in Ridgecrest and the Indian Wells Valley, which has recently expanded to include Trona in the Searles Valley. Community partners include the Indian Wells Water District, Maturango Museum Docents, Audubon Society, Historical Society, Sierra Sands School District, CA Native Plant Society (CNPS), and many other local groups and businesses that provide support. The program serves about 500 4th graders in the area from 10 different schools.

The program is designed to give children an appreciation of natural ecosystems and to emphasize the importance of water conservation in our desert environment. BLM donates use of a vehicle, storage space, equipment, and provides a supervisor and personnel to help. The program involves school sessions taught by volunteers, followed by field trips.

Sand Canyon is an ideal setting to explore aquatic and riparian ecosystems and to contrast these with the surrounding desert ecosystem. Students observe the variety of life in the canyon today, as well as learn about the primitive living conditions of the family who lived in Sand Canyon in the 1930s and 1940s. The field trips are all-day events in Sand Canyon where groups of about 12 to 15 students visit seven learning stations: Aquatics, Birds, Riparian Plants, Desert Plants, History, Archaeology, and Art.

The students pull on rubber boots at the Aquatics Station, gently step into the stream, and scoop up aquatic invertebrates in their nets. They are always excited to spot frogs and crayfish hopping or swimming in the stream. They empty their nets into tubs of water, and observe the differences between caddisfly, mayfly, dobson fly, stone fly larvae and a variety of aquatic organisms.

The volunteers who instruct at the Bird Station are from the local Audubon Society. They pass out binoculars and lead students on a bird-watching hike. Everyone gets excited when they spot a hawk soaring above them or a shrike perched in a treetop, scanning the desert floor for an unsuspecting lizard.

California Native Plant Society members volunteer at the Plant Station where they emphasize adaptations to intense heat and drought. In addition, they contrast desert plant

species to the nearby riparian and aquatic plants, including shady cottonwood trees and lush green water cress.

There have been volunteers at the History Station that actually lived at Sand Canyon Station as children when their father worked as an “aqueduct patrolman”. These volunteers demonstrate how the aqueduct passing through Sand Canyon works. They also show how the old wash tub and ringer were used and how the heavy iron was heated and pressed across clothing before electricity was available. At the Archaeology Station students learn how Native Americans made use of different types of rocks and plant materials.

At the Art Station students creatively express themselves through drawings of the fascinating features in Sand Canyon. The volunteers enjoy sharing their knowledge, and the students enjoy being out in nature and away from the classrooms. The children often develop life-long interests from these new experiences.