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Attention Editors: Science, Education, and Environment

Field Trips Inspire Youth to Protect Nature

San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy Launches New K-12 Conservation Initiatives

Solana Beach—After learning about different types of trash and what is reclaimable, a third-grader exclaimed, “I’m going to recycle for the rest of my life!” Students sorted displayed litter items into the appropriate bins as part of an interactive activity in San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy’s Our Living Watershed school program. The recycling component represents a major shift in program focus, as the conservancy launches conservation (action-oriented) education in its K-12 programs.

“Part of San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy’s mission is to promote ecological literacy and environmental responsibility,” said Doug Gibson, conservancy executive director. “Last year we began a strategic process to identify areas of opportunity in our school and public programs in order to influence deeper visitor connections of caring and positive behaviors—not just in San Elijo Lagoon—but transferred to other communities.”

The refined mission of the conservation education program is to: *Connect, educate, and engage the community to act to ensure the health and wellbeing of their watershed.* Most of the students are in schools located in or near the Escondido Creek watershed, which starts in Bear Valley above Lake Wohlford in the City of Escondido and stretches 26 miles through San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve, and into the Pacific Ocean. The cities of Solana Beach, Escondido and Encinitas represent participating school districts in the watershed.

Our Living Watershed has a unique elementary focus for students upstream in third through fifth grades. These programs are presented at no cost, and with bus transportation included, for Title I-designated elementary schools in Escondido. Each year students visit the lagoon and build on watershed knowledge. Studies show that frequent early-life outdoor experiences are the most important factors in developing an environmental ethic in adults. By providing an extended period in nature, combined with opportunities to explore and practice conservation skills, these field trips help to build a conservation ethic for life.

In third grade, students learn about animal adaptations, and that litter can harm and kill animals. They discuss and sort various types of trash and make pledges to recycle and not litter. Fourth-graders learn how plastics never decompose and disrupt food chains. They discuss ways to reduce plastics in their lives, make pledges to use fewer plastics, and then track their own behaviors at meeting these goals. When asked how a photo of the ocean filled with trash made them feel, one student replied, “Embarrassed.”

A pledge to conserve water is part of the fifth grade watershed program that focuses on the importance of our freshwater and saltwater habitats. By teaming up in pairs, students are challenged to wash dishes using as little water as possible.



Two Escondido middle schools are participating in Our Living Watershed, which includes classroom lessons, field study, data analysis, and community outreach. The program is designed to be fast-paced and multi-faceted to reach students with a wide range of interests, abilities, and maturity. Students are exposed to both science and conservation techniques that will help to build leadership and public outreach opportunities.

SDG&E is a proud supporter of the Our Living Watershed school program. “By showing children how what they do, every day, can affect their living watershed, San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy connects them to something much larger than what they might have realized otherwise,” said Pedro Villegas, director of community relations for SDG&E. “These children, many from underserved Title I schools, become active, full-time participants in their natural environment. They become our next generation of everyday environmental leaders. SDG&E is proud to support them and the conservancy.”

A highly educated corps of approximately 50 volunteer docents leads these field trips weekly in the reserve. Many of the docents are retired educators and professionals who are giving back to keep kids connected to nature—and with renewed focus—to be stewards in their own communities. Docents receive enhancement training throughout the year.

“We are receiving extremely positive feedback from everyone involved,” said Tara Fuad, conservancy education director. “Teachers enjoy watching their students taking ownership of environmental issues, and gaining the confidence and skills to take action for a cleaner future.” At the conclusion of a field trip recently, a parent chaperone shared, “Not only did the students learn about the environment, they learned how to be better human beings.”

Educators may inquire about Our Living Watershed school programs or make online reservations by visiting SanElijo.org/School-Programs or calling (760) 436-3944 x 701. School programs are free, although donations are accepted.

Support for the conservancy’s strategic education plan is provided by: SDG&E, Qualcomm, Coastal Conservancy, and California Coastal Commission Whale Tail.

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San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy is the community-supported nonprofit land trust for San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve.

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