



Some Good Reasons to Support the Redwood Valley Outdoor Education Project!

Dear Folks,

I work as an educational assistant at the Redwood Valley Outdoor Education Project (RVOEP). Our Outdoor School is focused on bringing nature to children in our community, many of whom don't spend much time outside with their parents. In fact, one time we had an entire third grade class that didn't know what bark was! It's not like bark is an important part of life, but if a kid doesn't know what bark is, they probably don't understand some of the bigger ecological concepts, like why it's important to recycle.

The RVOEP sits on 45 acres of woods, meadows, and river that belong to the Ukiah Unified School District (UUSD). Four days a week, classes from the UUSD come out and visit us. It's pretty neat; one class visits at a time, and because there's a teacher and an assistant at the RVOEP, we can split the class in half, so there are never more than fifteen students in your group at a time. That way, kids really get an opportunity to explore things in a small group, ask questions, and you're in a small enough group that you really get to see things. Our classes regularly get to see California quail, turkey vultures, gray squirrels, chipmunks, wood rat nests, red-shouldered hawks, cicadas hatching out of their exoskeletons, scrub and Steller's jays, caterpillars, and even pileated woodpeckers, not to mention a relatively intact mixed forest with wildflowers. Last year, we even got to watch a nesting Anna's hummingbird that had built her nest near where we eat lunch!

We serve kindergarten through sixth grade, and would love to involve older students as well. We have about six core programs, each geared toward a specific age group and designed to complement the curriculum standards of their grade. In second grade, they take apart a block of soil find out what it's made out of, who lives in it; in third grade they've found concrete evidence of food chains in the wild; fourth graders turn into birds to figure out why they migrate, what some of their challenges are, and steelhead, and to learn to check the water quality by what types of insects we find in the water. It's knowledge that will stay with them for the rest of their lives that you just can't learn out of books, and is so much more fun to learn about in the outdoors. And, I also think it's wonderful to be able to reach so many children, regardless of their cultural and economic backgrounds.

The amazing thing about the Redwood Valley Outdoor Education Project is that it's all funded by grants and donations, even the salaries of the teacher and assistants (who are credentialed employees of the school district). The land belongs to the school district; they bought it with the thought of building a school there, but there wasn't really adequate access, so it just sort of turned into the school district dump. A group of teachers and interested community members asked if they could clean it up and turn it in tan outdoor school, and the school district said that was okay – as long as it didn't cost the school district anything. Building the trails and clearing the poison oak was on thing, but paying for a teacher, an assistant, and all the buses (each bus costs \$90 a day, even from Ukiah, fifteen minutes away) is another. Thankfully, an anonymous person donated the salary for a teacher to work almost full time for six years. That was four years ago. We've pieced everything else together.

We would love to be able to run this Outdoor School for another ten years, to provide all of the children growing up around here with an understanding of what's around them, to provide a concrete, tactile understanding behind the things they learn about in the classroom: soil, food chains, natural communities, etc. We want to give every child access to this, even if their family can't spare a few dollars to help pay for the bus.

We know that what we're doing is really important. We're sharing the outdoors with kids, some of whom have never been in a forest before. We're showing them the diverse natural communities right in our area. And, it gives them a reason to be more thoughtful about the greater impact of their actions. I hear regularly from teachers that this is their absolute favorite field trip of the year, because the kids actually learn something – and that the students are talking about it weeks afterwards. And we know that what we're doing is having a positive impact on the kids because when we visit classrooms in the winter (when it's too wet to be in the woods), they treat us like celebrities. Every year, at least 2,000 students get to visit the outdoor school.

We sincerely hope that you will join in our efforts to continue this gift to our community by becoming a supporter of the Redwood Valley Outdoor Education Project. Your tax-deductible financial contributions are extremely helpful and greatly needed. RVOEP also appreciates those who can help out on workdays, or are able to provide some of the goods and services our programs require. Please join our team effort to create a positive future for our children and our earth.

Sincerely,
Adrienne Simpson (and all the staff and volunteers at RVOEP)