

Open Mind, Open Heart

by Santiago Escruceria

Editor's note: Assistant Education Director Santiago Escruceria has spent 4 summers in the field leading the Mono Lake Committee's Outdoor Experiences Program (OE). OE brings inner-city community based organizations and school groups to the Mono Basin for 3-5 days to show them the connection between urban and natural watersheds. We asked him to write about his perspective on the experience.



An OE Group down at Lee Vining Creek before watering trees as one restoration activity during their stay in the Mono Basin.

The Mono Lake Committee's Outdoor Experiences Program (OE) is an opportunity for me to spend quality time with inner-city youth and high school students that may have limited experiences outside of their cities. I have a unique chance to connect on a genuine level with some unbelievable people, while sharing nature, outdoor adventures, and an opportunity to create short-term cooperative community.

All through the outstanding time we get to spend together, we create a sense of intimacy, build trust, and share adventures. We fully experience the challenging moments that may arise such as the night hike and bagging a peak, but we also share laughs and moments of personal discovery. During our time together, one of my objectives is to support and enjoy a degree of trust and communication that they may have never encountered before.

Together we cultivate this atmosphere of trust and learning. I work diligently on this feeling of intimacy from the first moment we meet and keep it alive throughout their stay, while exploring one of the most humbling and dynamic outdoor classrooms in which I have ever taught.

We combine talent and energy working as a group to get the most learning and fun out of the time we have. We eat and cook together, hike together, and on our final evening, during the closing campfire, we share with everybody in the group our trip's highlights and personal discoveries. It is a powerful experience to hear stories about

conquering fears and overcoming obstacles. It is equally powerful to hear about their moments of awe and wonder.

OE gives me a chance to spend time with urban youth while exploring a world far away from their own daily lives, a beautiful world that for some seems alien, daunting, and sometimes misunderstood. I invite them to come here to discover that this basin and lake is theirs too.

On a more personal level, the Outdoor Experiences Program offers me the opportunity to do what I like most: to teach about the natural world and the role we humans play in it. Also, the story of Mono Lake provides me with the opportunity to show kids and adults that when we bring together our energy, goals, and spirits, we can and do make a difference.

I love OE because it benefits my own personal growth as well as the growth of others. My work with youth and adults of different backgrounds and ethnicities, asks of me to keep my mind and heart open. It is a rewarding experience. ❖

HOPE

by Carmen, Tree People 2001

Here in this higher elevation, I learned from the next generation
Our shared experience with the water, the land,
this community of people, birds and beasts
Playing with children, the bones, water, rocks, and plants
Everything gave me hope today

Santiago Escruceria is the Committee's Assistant Education Director. He's looking forward to a bingo-free summer after his second winter-long streak of losing at the local school's bingo fundraisers.