

# Stop and listen

Stories from the Outdoor Experiences program

by Molly Hucklebridge

**S**top and listen to the creek tell you a story. The handwritten laminated card rests on a cobblestone path next to Lee Vining Creek. As the wind sings through the pine needles and water cascades towards Mono Lake, the creek tells a different story to each student passing by.

On this “trail of beauty” hike, over thirty inspirational quotes and nature-related questions are left on laminated cards along the trail. One by one, participants from the Outdoor Experiences (OE) program follow the cards on a self-guided trek. It is an opportunity for the students to reflect, meditate, and use their imagination.

At their final destination, an overlook of Mono Lake, the students sit and write about their solo hike. OE participants, many of whom are high school students from inner-city Los Angeles, reflect on the activity and their surroundings.

## A chance to engage

From day one in the Mono Basin, OE staff encourage visiting students to engage with nature and to disconnect from their lives in the city. Electronics, junk food, and city conveniences are put aside for a week of living and learning in the outdoors.

Part of orientation includes a welcome gift: an OE field journal. The 24-page journal contains maps of the Mono Basin and Los Angeles aqueduct system, the ecology and geology of Mono Lake, a review of the area’s natural history, tips on using water wisely, and ample unstructured space for



OE students with their field journals on the Mt. Dana trail.

SANTIAGO ESCHUCERNA

personal reflections.

Throughout the week, students use the journal to document their outdoor experiences. Though a typical academic setting might discourage using “I” or “we,” here the OE staff encourages personal narratives and self-expression through art and poetry.

As an OE Instructor, I’ve seen the benefits of applying

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**O**n the last night of each Outdoor Experiences week students are encouraged to share poems written on their final all-day hike, typically at the top of a mountain peak. Below are some vertical poems that capture students’ thoughts and experiences from their five-day trip to the Mono Basin.

**M** - Motions of waves move

**O** - On a once in a life time trip

**N** - Nature isn’t what I thought

**O** - Obstacles that make a better lake

**L** - Learning many new different things

**A** - Attitude is what makes this trip

**K** - Kindness is what this lake needs

**E** - Enjoying the life of nature

by Enisha, 17 years old

LACC Clean & Green (Los Angeles)

**F** - Fantastic hike, with an

**A** - Amazing sight

**B** - Bright beautiful sky, we’re

**U** - Unbelievably high, so

**L** - Lovely, I can’t say goodbye, I’ve

**O** - Opened my heart and mind, to this

**U** - Unforgettable time, because I’m

**S** - Satisfied without being high

by Eddie, 18 years old

Olympic Academy (Los Angeles)

**F** - Feeling of peace

**R** - Running between the trees

**E** - Euphoric sensations running  
through my veins

**E** - Each and every breath

**D** - Departures soon to come

**O** - Onto insane streets

**M** - My life was not the same,  
when I came to Mono Lake

by Edgar, 17 years old

Olympic Academy (Los Angeles)



MOLLY HUCKLEBRIDGE

Delia and Taylor from Silverado High School in Las Vegas conduct water quality tests at Mono Lake.

personal narratives and art activities in the outdoor classroom. I remember a tenth grader with the reading and writing level of a third grader. He shared his poem about tackling a peak, and impressed his peers and himself. Instead of focusing on grammar or the facts, writing became less intimidating and a subject where he could succeed.

Some studies suggest that personal narratives may require a higher level of thinking. A first-hand account requires OE participants to open their hearts and minds in this unique place.

For some students it is difficult to share thoughts and feelings with their peers. However, by creating a safe space—free from put downs and teasing laughter—OE staff enable participants to share poems and excerpts from their journal entries during the week's final evening activity. Much to the participants' surprise, the personal reflections help them relate to their classmates and relish in their shared experiences. ❖

*Summer 2007 was Molly Hucklebridge's second season with OE. An avid autobiographer, she has a picture and journal entry from every day she's lived in the Mono Basin!*

## Outdoor Experiences meets More Kids in the Woods

by Bartshé Miller

In an effort to reverse the nationwide disconnect between children and nature, the US Forest Service is trying to get more kids to experience the natural world, beyond the fast-food, video game culture of today's youth. Called More Kids in the Woods (MKIW), this program awards thousands of dollars in matching funds to outdoor programs around the country. The Mono Lake Committee's Outdoor Experiences (OE) program received assistance in 2007.

Last year more than 250 groups across the country competed for funding. The OE program received a \$15,000 grant, which was matched by the Committee and partners to help with travel scholarships, new life vests for canoeing, and staff time. Partners in the grant included the Inyo National Forest, the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power, the Water Replenishment District of Southern California, and a multitude of Los Angeles area school and community groups.

Seventeen groups from Southern California, comprising over 300 youth, participated in OE during 2007. Participants hiked, climbed, canoed, and assisted with restoration and service projects during their stays in the Mono Basin. Service projects included hands-on restoration work at Rush and Lee Vining Creeks. A new OE activity in 2007 gave students the opportunity to post their outdoor experiences online, helping to keep their connection with Mono Lake and the Eastern Sierra continue well after returning home.

With the assistance of MKIW, more kids than ever before hiked, paddled among tufa towers, and got their hands dirty in the magnificent Eastern Sierra landscape. For many of them it

was the first time they had visited the Mono Basin, slept under a full canopy of stars, or trekked to the top of a mountain peak. For all, the trip to Mono Lake provided a clean break from a cityscape of concrete, noise, and electronic stimulation. At Mono the natural, not the artificial, prevails on the senses. When this happens kids have a chance to self-reflect in ways they might never do at home. They have time to heal the disconnect with nature. Thanks to the More Kids in the Woods grant, more kids from Los Angeles did just that in 2007.



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*Catching brine shrimp from a canoe is one highlight of Outdoor Experiences supported by More Kids in the Woods.*