Places Visited

Sierra Nevada’s Ansel Adams Wilderness
Los Angeles County Outdoor Science School (LACOSS)
Joshua Tree National Park
San Diego State University (SDSU)

What’s happening in ECOEE 2014

This 3rd installment of the newsletter covers our time spent on our backpacking expedition in the Sierra Nevada’s Ansel Adams wilderness, it also covers our week spent with the 5th graders and staff from Los Angeles County Outdoor Science School. We then proceed to Joshua Tree National Park where we did some interpretive programs and got some hiking in, and last but not least our transition period between the front country and our backcountry trip in Mexico is being spent at San Diego State University (SDSU)

Disclaimer: ECOEE’s Publications and Promotions Committee is not responsible for any spelling or grammar errors in the students’ articles. All articles are included as submitted.
“A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape… Where man himself is a visitor who does not remain… [That is] affected primarily by the forces of nature… [and] has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation…” – Wilderness Act of 1964

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Where I Play by John Wiegert

Ask any person what they think Outdoor Recreation is and they will probably tell you the same thing I am thinking right now and that is camping. The problem with that is that camping literally only means that you live in a tent or camper. Now we have to dig a little deeper. Where do we camp? When I was in middle school me and a couple friends set up my parent’s camper in the backyard and went camping for my birthday party. Now that I am on this expedition camping is quite a bit different. After three months camping isn’t so much a pastime as it is how I live. Typically you can find me sleeping in our green beast of a tent with Kenny Bambini. Now as I think a little more Outdoor Recreation is much bigger than a tent with a beautiful background.

Outdoor Recreation is huge. Recreation is the way we have fun. Currently ECOEE is at San Diego State University and we’ve met with a man named Jim. Jim is the director of Aztec Adventures. The program they have is pretty great at defining what is commonly recognized as outdoor recreation, they have programs that involve: backpacking, canoeing, climbing, kayaking, and of course camping. Aztec Adventures typically takes groups of students out for just a weekend. The biggest trips they take are right around a week long. In my travels across the country and throughout the semester I have realized that Outdoor Recreation is to most people something brief. But to a select few like myself, Outdoor Recreation isn’t just what we do on the weekends, camping, hiking, backpacking, mountaineering, canoeing… these things aren’t something brief. For me this is what I do. This is where I play. This is where I laugh. This is where I cry. This is where I learn.

Picture Taken by Curtis Stark at Slab Lake in the Ansel Adams Wilderness
Any teacher can sit his or her students down in a classroom and stand in front of them and talk about something. In fact most teachers do precisely that. Throughout most of my schooling I have sat in a chair made from plastic probably purchased in bulk by my school. That little plastic chair has typically been surrounded by brick walls, concrete, drywall, and fluorescent lights and some sort of desk. As I sat in my little chair behind my desk I would attempt to take notes and retain what I was being told, and sometimes I would just struggle to stay awake.

Throughout this expedition my classroom has been very different. Instead of a little plastic chair I sit on the dirt or a “comfy” rock. An outdoor classroom has everything to do with the setting. Over the semester I have seen several different types of classrooms. The first time I had an outdoor education lesson this semester was at a grassy lake shore under a tarp in Northern Ontario Canada, where I learned about habitats and homes of animals. So why does the classroom make a difference? Well in the outdoor classroom a student isn’t just sitting in a plastic chair listening to a lecture. The student is in fact a part of the topic. Unlike a traditional classroom the outdoors provides a place that is spontaneous. For me as the “teacher” of my designated topic I can pass by something that relates to my topic and say “Hey, check this out!” When a student can actually learn in the moment, and when an interesting fact is relatable to an experience of seeing a beaver leave its lodge that is what education should be!

I can confidently say that I have learned far more this semester than I have in any schooling before this semester. I know I have retained more information and that is entirely due to the place I learned it. Hopefully from this semester I can take some of what I learned and help other universities, elementary, middle, and high schools realize how important it is to learn experientially and that sitting in a plastic chair is not the most conducive setting in which to learn from.

“Keep yourself clean and bright, for you are the window in which you see the world”
What Is Wilderness? By Vickey Benhart

While Participating on ECOEE you are given many opportunities to learn along the way, which include about yourself and about the topics we were given back in the spring semester. When visiting Joshua Tree National Park we were given an awesome opportunity to observe and listen to an night interpretation program. The presenter has been in the National Park Service for almost 10 years. With all of her experience she know a lot about what she was talking about. She asked us what is Wilderness. Some responded with a place to escape, No People, No buildings, or wilderness is a place to connect with nature, and yes we are doing this everyday while ECOEE is going on. We are sleeping in the wilderness every night, cooking in the dark and we have for sure experienced those chilly, scorching hot and even very windy nights. (Especially in Joshua Tree National Park) While on ECOEE we have experienced it all. Just like the early settlers we really didn’t know what to expect. Most of have only seen photographs of the beautiful places that we are visiting. When Wilderness was just being explored there weren’t expectations. That’s how you have to go into ECOEE with no expectations. Take everything in you only get to experience ECOEE once, twice if you are lucky and come back as a Graduate Assistant, or if you’re Jeff your even luckier you get to experience it year after year. On ECOEE you are learning on a daily basis, about how places got their names, who roamed the land, and there is always something to be learned. The Wilderness Is one beautiful place that only has been explored by few and left untouched by many, and we have gotten the opportunity to explore these beautiful places.

“...The Wilderness holds answers to more questions than we have yet learned to ask.”
— Nancy Wynne Newhall
Over the course of the semester we’ve been exposed to a few adventure recreation agencies. They all send people out into the wild. We met with Elyse at NOLS, and Tom at Summit Adventure. They showed us where and how they prepare students, along with what their goals are when it comes to their programs.

Just a short while ago we were in the Ansel Adams Wilderness, backpacking. I was reminded of those places that we had visited. We pulled rations and packed our packs. Jeff and Tiffany drove us up to the mountains from Bass Lake, California, and allowed us to design our own routes through the mountains. We were given true experiential education as the map and compass work was on us. Jeff, being the instructor, shadowed us from a distance. If he saw something going wrong, or a particular struggle on behalf of our group, he’d shout to us from wherever he was hidden in the woods so we could correct ourselves.

For the first couple days we went along as a group, all 12 of us. It was slow going and we really had to support one another, as well as take care of ourselves. So when we got to a rock chute near Burro Lake and Jeff sent our little tent groups off on our own, we were all excited. We would all end up in the same spot that night. That was a great day. My group got to see Jeff at the top of a ridge. We were resting and he came over the top, smashing cairns saying how he hated them if they weren’t on a trail. He passed us, and, about 20 feet later heard, ”Oh, I guess this is a trail.” Hilarious.

We all moved to the same campsites, except in our little groups for the next couple days. That was great. Jeff challenged us one night, and told us to meet at a place that was on his map, but not ours. We had to write thorough route descriptions and find our way there just using the landmarks. My group challenged ourselves and went up a large, steep nearby ridge. We contoured along it and came down, meeting Jeff and heading to the rendezvous point. From there we did our final expedition, all on our own without Jeff.

My group started off by summiting Post Peak, which was definitely the highlight of our journey. Seeing Kenny, Josh, and Haley simultaneously freaking out and shouting for joy as we touched the Post was awesome. Everything from there was, literally, downhill to the trailhead two days later.

I topped off our group’s trek by baking them bread with dead yeast. I didn’t know that the yeast was dead. But I should’ve known that it was since it was from Canada. Thankfully they all forgave me and we reached the trailhead in high spirits, where a freshly shaven Jeff picked us up.
We Do it for the Kids! By Josh Baughman

Los Angeles County Outdoor Science School or LACOSS is an outdoor science school that caters towards middle school kids. For four days the students of ECOEE were the co-cabin leaders with high school students from South Pasedena High school that volunteered for a week to be with fifth graders from Marengo middle school. Actually being able to spend more than one day with a group of kids was awesome because we got to see the 24/7 implementation of outdoor education with the kids as well as the growth which they went through. One boy and one girl cabin were assigned to one of the naturalists/teachers for the week, so each naturalist had two cabins worth of kids which usually came out to be 18 kids give or take a couple. All throughout the week the kids were involved in outdoor science experiments and education, given specific responsibilities during the day, and daily chores. The school had their curriculum focused on three different ecosystems; mountain forests, tidal pools, and the riparian zone. The naturalists all had degrees in different areas of biology or elementary education which was shown very well through their teaching and working with the kids. What I found to be the most inspiring was the teachers flexibility and willingness to utilize teachable moments that would present themselves. On one of the days at the beach we ran into a spear fisher that was willing to let us use his fish to teach the kids some things. What I thought was most interesting is that the teachers introduced the kids to dissection, and the kids were open to seeing it. Any other time I would think kids would be grossed out or opposed to killing but they weren’t and it was really cool to witness that and what they learned from it. I learned a lot about addressing fifth grade aged kids and how they learn from my time at LACOSS and it was probably one of my most favorite places we’ve been yet.
After the Sierra Nevada hike, I learned many things on planning my own program if I wanted to go forth with one. First you have to look at your group and determine if they are physically and emotionally capable of doing a strenuous hike. Then you want to know if this is what’s best for the group. Do they want to do this? Will they get anything out of this? Those are some questions you have to ask yourself. Next is the food, since all backcountry courses run on our belly’s and since we were hiking we had to think about how important food was since we will be burning more calories than when we were canoeing in Canada. So what I just put up was some things to keep in mind. As an outdoor leader you must be a step ahead of everyone with your plan. The plan you come up with is not something you do for your own pleasure it’s something you do when you have a group and you go from there in the planning process. It’s no easy task doing so since every group will be different and they will be faced with a different challenge than other groups. The planning process is a fun and hard time to do but in ECOEE we get experience with our backcountry expeditions, then more importantly we get to meet with professionals in the field. Seeing what they do on a daily basis is very rewarding at the end of the day since that is a piece of the puzzle you can take away and use for your own program. So as I sit here I would have never imagined ECOEE to be such a long planning process until I took part in the adventure and now I’m living it.
Transitions are always different, whether good or bad they require attention. Coming from the back country to the front country has been a difficult transition for our group. The unity developed within tent groups is empowering and hard to transition out of. We have a unity as the large group but with fewer people in a group, the bond is on a more intimate level. The transition leaving the Sierras was much easier on the group than it was leaving the Missinaibi river. The chore responsibilities were not completely forgotten because we were in the Sierras for just five days.

After the sierras, we all were looking forward to Malibu California where we would spend a week with Los Angeles County Outdoor Science School as cabin leaders for fifth graders. We started that week by meeting the LACOSS staff and introducing ourselves as ECOEE. It is amazing how every time we tell others what we are doing it shocks me to hear what we have accomplished. We are a diverse group of students with different majors and different passions. After this week, our group received many compliments by the naturalists. They see a group of students who have the potential to be very successful.

As we cross the country we are encountered with different ecosystems, landscapes, thoughts and people. Now in San Diego we were told we would stick out like a sore thumb, all our guys have beards and our girls rock unique styles. From appearance we might stick out like a sore thumb but after talking to the Aztec Adventure staff, we are not much different than them; young people that are devoting some of their life to real experiences, real people and real consequences.

“I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel’s sake. The great affair is to move.”

Robert Louis Stevenson

We Travel, We Work and We Shop by Haley Brasile
ECOEE witnessed its first interpretive presentation at Bryce Canyon National Park in early October. It was a night program led by a volunteer ranger by the name of Don, who had obviously given this presentation plenty of times and was a little less than enthused about doing it again. The topic was astronomy, and the theme was… well, actually, I’m not sure what the theme was. To be quite honest, I really don’t think the program had a theme at all. Don’s monotone voice definitely didn’t give me any hints. Afterwards, when we asked him how he adjusted his programs for his audience and how he developed his theme, we were met with blank stares. I was disappointed.

Interpretation was supposed to be this great tool of the National Park service to reveal the meaning of a resource to an audience by connecting that tangible resource to an intangible idea, a universal concept. To provoke thought, change perspectives and inspire care for a cultural, historical or natural resource by presenting the audience with a bigger picture through relevant, themed information. But, what interpretation I had experienced so far on this expedition was far from this ideal.

After the let-downs at Yellowstone and Bryce Canyon, I decided that maybe interpretation was just that, an ideal concept. It sounded good on paper and had some lofty, higher-purpose goals, but in practice, no one really knew how to execute it. According to the textbooks, interpretation should be themed, organized, relevant and entertaining, but what does that really mean? What does that actually look like? Execution is where interpretation fell apart in my mind.

Then, ECOEE went to its second interpretive night program. This program was led by an interpretive park ranger named Sarah at Joshua Tree National Park and it was about the value of wilderness. I was blown away by this presentation. There was a clear theme developed throughout the program. It was well organized and easy to follow. It was relevant, using specific examples from Joshua Tree and drawing from visitor experience. It was entertaining. Not only was Ranger Sarah excited about the topic, but she engaged the audience through questions and conversations. In talking with her after the presentation, I realized that unlike volunteer-ranger Don, Sarah had received training exclusively in interpretation. She told us about how the National Park Service has put together standards for interpretation and how some parks stress this training and those standards more than others. She directed us toward the training, which she said is open to anyone, at epilogue.org. I was happy to see that interpretation really did have the potential to be everything it claimed to be, to meet those higher-purpose goals. In the future, I hope to see all the national parks embrace the transformative power of interpretation, to make the ideal a reality.
Understanding Ourselves and the Wilderness by Cheyenne Wilson

Once again, along this expedition we have found ourselves finding more understanding in ourselves and one another through group decision making, problem solving, conflict resolution, goal setting and accomplishment, and community living. While hiking the Ansel Adams Wilderness as a group in the Sierra Nevada National Forest, we found ourselves split up into tent groups once again. This grouping happened a day and a half into the trip. Coming into this tent group, John, Curtis, Cassidy, and I were feeling a bit apprehensive about the dynamics in our group. You see, not everyone gets along at every waking moment of the day. The four of us in one way or another had not gotten along in some sense along the expedition.

When we were split into our tent groups, we hiked with only one another and planed and executed our own route for the day. Each group would always start and end at the same location. Every day each group would communicate and collaborate the route we were going to conquer for the day, all while trying to keep a distance from one another. After two days of not too many wrong turns and not getting lost, Jeff made the decision to let our tent groups go on our final expedition. This meant our tent groups were going to set goals, make group decisions, and live with only one another for two days. It was only John, Curtis, Cassidy and I. No Jeff. No Tiffany. No one else, but the four of us.

The experience our group was involved in was by far the best experience I have had this whole entire expedition. Our group may not of summited Post Peak like some of the other groups, but we conquered so many personal challenges. John learned how to trust others more than he ever has, Curtis pushed himself harder than ever before, Cassidy learned how to not be quick with assumptions and judgments of others and true forgiveness, and I walked out of there with a new meaning of patience. Those two days that we spent together and the skills that we learned will never be forgotten.
Leadership Skills on the Grindstone by Curtis Stark

The Wilderness Education Association is an organization committed to the continuation of professionalism in the outdoors by initiating standards and advocacy which is exactly what is happening on our semester on ECOEE. RPTA 446 is the WEA class that sets the standards and expectations for our outdoor living skills, planning and logistics, risk management, and leadership. One thing we do to meet these expectations is we have to keep an academic journal. This journal has structured entry questions to get us thinking about certain aspects of the day like the leadership style that was used or certain expedition behaviors that were exhibited. The WEA also gives us a topic to teach to our fellow expedition members. These topics include things like weather and how to read the colors and symbols of topographical maps. These things are necessary to keep our skills sharp in the out of doors. Another thing we do is rotate in and out of being the leaders of the group on a weekly basis. Every week there is a new group of three leaders. One person, however, is a carryover from the previous week and different person will carry over to the next week so sometimes you might be a LOW or leader of the week two weeks in a row. Along with being a leader for a week, at the end of the week, we have to evaluate ourselves and our other two LOWs based on their performance and the decisions they made. These standards and expectations are set in place to keep us always improving our skills as outdoors leaders and to set us up for a better time in the future.

“If you’re not improving you’re getting worse”
I am trying to receive a degree in Outdoor Leadership. I am learning not only the skills necessary to lead groups through the outdoors, but those ideal in being an interpretive speaker and wilderness educator. I am also learning that getting an audience to care about the knowledge and information you have to share is a mundane and seemingly impossible task. A few weeks ago, I gave a lesson on rock identification. Even the most spectacular geologists have a hard time making geology sound like something you want to dive into and explore. So there I stood, a slab of monzogranite in hand, trying to convince a bunch of drooling college students that this rock is important to them. All the while they are ignoring me, they are running their hands through the pebbles and sediment that make up the ground they walk on.

We owe great acknowledgement to the founders of our National Parks for their amazing ability to grab an audience and say, “Hey- you need these resources. They are here for you, and it is up to YOU to protect them. Here’s how…” The problem we face with interpretation lies in the standards and education behind the specialty. We have sat through many a talks that are uninteresting, unorganized, and lacking in any passion or excitement. I approached the speaker afterwards to ask him a few questions about how he developed his theme, and he glanced at me, sort of confused, as if he had never even heard of such a thing. It was just a day job; something so tedious that brought him enough joy to keep coming back day after day. On the contrary, we have been so privileged to witness a proper interpretation in action at Joshua Tree NP. It was a beautiful night in the desert to talk about the wilderness. As you noticed, I said “talk” and not “learn.” We were a part of a conversation that involved us! We were standing in wilderness, appreciating it, and enjoying the efforts made by the National Park Service to protect every bit of it. We listened to the howls of coyotes and stared at pictures of the sun setting behind the rocks. I could relate to the feelings Sarah was talking about, and I knew what the wilderness meant to me.

It has all to do with the relevance of the information and how it is presented to the audience. The passion has to be there for the speaker, but also for the listener. As we listened to our feedback last night over the lessons we had taught, Jeff had some thoughtful insight. He of course was probably quoting someone before him, and I will not attempt to repeat it, but he made us think. Interpretation is not about what the listener will do with the information given to them, but how that information will have a lasting change in their life.
Land to Sea by Greg Strobel

ECOEE 2014 is coming to the final stretch of the expedition and were getting ready to hit the water again. Except the thing is, it’s not going to be anything like the water we got used to in Canada. It’s definitely not going to be anything like the canoes we got used to in Canada. We’re going to be sea kayaking in the Sea of Cortez for seven days. An important skill set we learn while on our expedition is planning and logistics. The knowledge, skills, and abilities to design, implement, and prepare outdoor expedition trips of a minimum of seven days long is a specific set of skills we acquire and put to practice while on ECOEE. We all had plenty of say as to what will be going on in Baja, California because at this point into the journey there is a little more leeway with scheduling and what has to be done. This was the first part of ECOEE where we were all able to put our heads together and think about what we would like to do instead of what was on the pre written itinerary. We scheduled a hike to Santa Maria Mission to see remnants of an old mission in an Oasis. The hike is said to be beautiful and have great cultural history of the peninsula that we will be hearing plenty about through interpretation presentations. When it comes to planning and logistics the whole group is taking into consideration, but a lot of it falls on the leaders of the week, which just happens to be: Josh, Cassidy, and myself.

Aside from Baja California we had to figure out dates and reservations for when we are out of Mexico. I will not give too much information away but it looks like we’re sticking to our motto and taking the long way home! Leading groups can only be done if the proper skill sets are there, and planning and logistics is what ties it all together.
Being Educated by Greg Strobel

ECOEE is a unique program because it is constant change, it is learning how to transition from situation to situation. One of the biggest transitions I have gone through on this expedition thus far has been from the Sierra Nevada Mountains backpacking through the Ansel Adams Wilderness to being a cabin leader for fifth graders at Los Angeles County Outdoor Science School. We finished our final hike in the mountains making it back to the trail head with our tent groups on Friday afternoon; Monday morning we were in Malibu getting prepped on our duties for the week as cabin leaders. Along with the responsibilities of being a cabin leader we were shadowing the naturalist of our designated group throughout the week and had the opportunity to give a couple of our own lessons along with teachable moments. Ellie, the naturalist I was assigned at LA-COSS, was an amazing teacher and provided me with different ways to think about outdoor education, things about fifth graders, and the outdoor field in general.
Managing Mayhem By Cassidy Depoy

Probably one of our most extensive professional visits on the ECOEE expedition was our week spent at L.A. County Outdoor Science School (LACOSS). We were completely immersed in their program; leading cabins full of fifth graders through their science schooling experience and supporting the staff along the way. LACOSS offers a unique educational experience for all youth in the Malibu area through their nature hikes and outdoor activities pertaining to science and wildlife. The kids are dropped off by their teachers, left in the hands of the Naturalists at science school. They then move into their cabin, where they stay for the week under the supervision of super experienced, highly responsible outdoor leaders (us).

What made this program different from other outdoor education facilities we’ve visited in the past was their procedure for giving and receiving feedback among the Cabin Leaders (us) and the Naturalists. Not only do the kids get graded, the Naturalists and Cabin Leaders are evaluated on their execution of teaching material and leading the kids through an educational experience. Their staff is always open to new ideas and improvements between the programs and lessons. It was awesome seeing this process followed through in a professional setting the same way that it is for our leadership and management classes. I could see the immediate take-away from what we do every week in peer evaluations.

By the end of our expedition, we will be able to lead groups and teach them in a wilderness setting the same way we did in our week at LACOSS. We have to create a ten-day trip plan that will be based around the management and programming tips we learn from all of our professional visits with adventure recreation facilities. From just one week with the fifth graders, I can actually see myself leading groups in the outdoors. I felt a part of something very natural to me, and I fell in love with teaching science to kids. I kind of feel like an outdoor leader… crazy, right?

“The measure of who we are is what we do with what we have.”

P A G E 15
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“Great things are done by a series of small things brought together”

- Vincent Van Gogh
Adios Amigos! We’re off to Baja California and keep following us on our blog at:

ecoee2014.blogspot.com

Take the Long Way Home