



Trees, Sunshine and Experts Give Kids a Special School Day

Ten-year-old Ruben Calderone of Casa Grande liked the fact that the Environmental Improvement Day program his fourth grade had attended was outdoors.

"We can learn more about nature when we're outdoors," he said a month later. "Like when we were learning about trees, you could just look there and see a real tree."

His class from Saguario Elementary, along with fourth grades from five other Casa Grande schools, went to the annual program at Palo Verde Elementary in April. In all, about 500 fourth-graders participated.

Specialists in a variety of environmental subjects came from as far as Phoenix and Tucson in order to man 12 learning stations visited by one class at a time. These instructors represented several state and federal agencies plus private enterprises.

Ruben's classmate Heather Robinette, 9, liked the station about soils: "We learned about how water goes into the soil. They showed how they go out to the farm and check the soil to see if it's good for growing things."

Missy Scavo, 10, said that the station about birds was her favorite.

At another station, children felt with their hands how water can be heated by the sun. At a fourth, they could use a computerized game to try out different ways of meeting global needs for energy.

Environmental Improvement Day is planned each year by Pinal County 4-H leaders in cooperation with the Casa Grande elementary schools. Topics for the day mesh with students' classroom work.

John Stair, wildlife specialist for the UA Extension Service, (right) is a popular teacher at many Environmental Improvement Day programs. This one was at Oracle last spring. (Photo by Gordon Graham.)

Ruben said, for example, "In science class we read about how trees grow, then at Environment Day they had samples of plants and you could see the roots right on them."

Dr. Marie Atteberry, the principal at Ruben's school, explained, "If teachers know they can depend on Environment Day towards the end of the school year, they can plan their lessons accordingly and have it be a positive culminating activity."

"We always develop a notebook of resource materials for teachers based on the day's program," said Gene Moffett, director of educational services for the Casa Grande elementary schools.

4-H and Kiwanis

The Palo Verde School and its principal, David Hernandez, have hosted the program for Casa Grande elementary schools each spring since 1974. The original Environmental Improvement Day that year grew from a proposal by a community 4-H club and volunteer 4-H leaders, backed by the Kiwanis Club and adopted by the school district.

"It was planned as a way for 4-H clubs to help their community by bringing information to other young people about environmental subjects relevant to the times," Sherwood "Woodie" Winans recalled recently. He has been a Pinal County 4-H agent for the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Service since 1971, and a coordinator for each year's Environmental Improvement Day.

Bob Hernbrode, education director for the Arizona Game and Fish Department at the time, helped plan early Environmental Improvement Day programs.

After three successful years in Casa Grande, the program began expanding to other parts of Pinal County. Now it is an annual event in Coolidge, Kearny, San Manuel and Oracle. Extension Service 4-H Aide Mary Bailey coordinates the programs in the eastern part of the county.

Last year, similar Environment Day programs began in Phoenix. Maricopa County 4-H Agent Marlene Obst and 4-H Aide Janice Armstrong have organized the programs for 10 schools in six Phoenix school districts.

"We plan to continue to do three or more each semester," Obst said this summer.

Most of the Phoenix programs are for fourth, fifth and sixth graders,



Left: Students at an Environmental Improvement Day in Coolidge check out insects under a binocular microscope.

Center: During a 1982 session at San Manuel, Sarah Gorby shows students a young javelina recovering from a leg injury.

Right: A Cottonwood School fourth-grader views the moon during Casa Grande's 1978 Environmental Improvement Day. (Photos by Guy Webster.)



Top: Casa Grande students build a wall with saguaro ribs and mud, with guidance from Pima Indian builders. (Photo by Guy Webster.)

Bottom: Tanya Hamilton of the Desert Dwellers 4-H Club helps paint enclosures at a wildlife rehabilitation center near Casa Grande. The project is a spin-off from Environmental Improvement Day. (Photo by Jana Carroll.)

and will not be repeated at the same school for three years.

John Dalmolin brought an Environment Day to Moon Mountain School in the Washington District when he was principal there. Later he transferred to Cholla Elementary School, "and I immediately wanted to make arrangements for having the program there, too," he said.

"It brings a lot of outdoor experiences into an urban setting," Dalmolin continued. "Many of the children wouldn't have these experiences otherwise. They can read about things in books, or see pictures, or see movies, but those are different than real hands-on experiences." His students had the chance to find out what a snake feels like and what a sheep feels like, among other new experiences.

"They like the chance to ask questions and to try things themselves," he said.

Desert Ark

At most Environmental Improvement Day programs in Pinal or Maricopa county, each class stops at three to five learning stations and joins other classes for a program about desert wildlife featuring several live animals. Hal Gras, who built the Desert Ark educational project of the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum, and Sarah Gorby, who tends injured or abandoned animals for the Arizona Game and Fish Department, have each led the large-group presentation about wildlife many times.

Some of the programs in Pinal County have narrowed in on a theme, such as "You can solve the energy challenge." Typically, however, the learning stations offer a wide diversity of subjects.

At Coolidge one year, students played a predator-and-prey food chain game and cooked hot dog slices with a solar reflector. At Casa Grande they built a small hut with the old Pima Indian techniques using saguaro ribs and mud.

Kearny students at Ray Elementary School looked at insects through a microscope. At San Manuel last April, students discussed the air-pollution protesters who had climbed the smelter stack near the school a few weeks earlier.

Local 4-H members usually serve as guides for the Environmental Improvement Day programs, making sure each class finds where it is scheduled to go next. Four-H'ers also run some of the learning stations. For example, a 4-H drama group in Casa Grande produced a puppet show for the program at Palo Verde Elementary last spring.

The Environmental Improvement Day programs have helped interest students in finding out more about 4-H, according to Angie Ruelas. She works in the Palo Verde School library and is volunteer leader for the Palo Verde Community 4-H Club.

The programs have also sparked related 4-H projects such as a wildlife rehabilitation center that 4-H'ers helped build near Casa Grande this spring and summer. Under supervision from the Arizona Game and Fish Department and a local veterinarian, 4-H'ers will help care for birds and animals not yet ready for release.

"The Environmental Improvement Day program shows 4-H as a future-oriented group," said 4-H Agent Winans. "Our future will depend on the development of our young people and on how well they learn to use natural resources. First-hand experiences led by men and women in natural-resource careers are a good way to teach them."

Fourth grader Heather Robinette summed it up: "I thought it was real fun, and we learned a lot."