

Youth Breathe New Life into Rio Grande Silvery Minnow Sanctuary

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What happens when you take urban youth and introduce them to an urban fish sanctuary in need of some hard work and attention? In the case of the Rio Grande Silvery Minnow Sanctuary (Sanctuary), it was a match made in fishy heaven!

An extraordinary group of eager young people from two local schools were just itching to make a difference and show the world what they could do.

It all started in October of 2011, when 10 freshmen students from Amy Beihl Charter High School made their first visit to the Rio Grande Silvery Minnow Sanctuary. The students spent the afternoon learning about and removing invasive non-native vegetation. It was hard work, but a connection developed between the students and this natural place not-so-far from home.

After that first fateful visit, the students continued to spend time each month at the sanctuary doing site volunteer work such as non-native species removal, sedimentation build up removal, designing and planting a pollinator garden, creating cotton wood tree protection against beavers and designing and constructing trails.

The Sanctuary itself is located along the Rio Grande Bosque, just a few miles from downtown Albuquerque. It is a refugia, which means that it is designed to mimic natural conditions for the Rio Grande Silvery Minnow, a federal and state listed endangered species. So, rather than being raised in a pond or in tanks, these endangered fish will live as closely as possible to how they do in the wild, making the transition to the Rio Grande a smooth one with less stress on the minnows.

Throughout that year, Amy Beihl students worked alongside New Mexico Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office staff with the help of several other partners in developing the Rio Grande Silvery Minnow Sanctuary Environmental Education Center located inside the sanctuary. But the Sanctuary's incredible connection to local youth didn't end with those 10 students.

A new project started in the classroom at ACE Leadership High School, beginning with a contest to see who would get to design actual bridges and kiosks that would one day be built by the students themselves as part of their classroom curriculum. ACE Leadership High School is a charter school that focuses on creating young leaders in the construction profession.

This collaborative project between ACE, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and EDI is aimed at working with these local students for the benefit of the community and schools in order to share the importance of ecosystems and endangered species with the public, as well as to connect youth with nature.

In September 2012, more than 25 ACE high school students began construction of these visitor viewing bridges and informational kiosks that they had envisioned and designed. From September 17 to the 28, the students worked at the sanctuary as part of this hands-on educational project which provides the students with real-life career experience in the construction field.

Each student held an important job on site, with titles such as head architect and Foreman. These are important titles that the students took seriously while carrying out tasks with precision.

There is little that is more important than introducing our youth to the natural world, showing them their connection to it, while helping them to learn practical skills. The Rio Grande Silvery Minnow Sanctuary has become an excellent example of how this type of youth partnership can be both beneficial to the students, as well as to the fish who will call the sanctuary home. Because of the hard work and dedication of the students of today, students of tomorrow will be able to reap the rewards of their efforts for years to come by enjoying the trails, kiosks, bridges and so much more that have been created here by these amazing young people.

Staff from the New Mexico Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office, along with the help of other dedicated service staff and their many partners have made a huge effort to involve students in the life of the Sanctuary, and this effort has clearly paid off.

The Service would like to thank our many partners, without whom this amazing experience might have never come to fruition. Thanks to; Bernallio Master Naturalists, EDI Architecture, NM Plant Society, BOR, NMSU Cooperative Extension, and NM State Parks.

For more information on these projects or for directions to visit the Rio Grande Silvery minnow Sanctuary, please e-mail Nicole Haskett Osborn at: nicole_haskett@fws.gov

To learn more about ACE Leadership High school, please check out this amazing video, brought to us by The Odyssey Initiative: <http://www.odysseyinitiative.org/about/#nm>