

The Green Zone

By Patricia Dines



Nature's Magical Discovery Hut

Exploring earth's intricacies is not just for kids

Entering Spring Lake's Environmental Discovery Center is like stumbling upon a quirky little forest cottage inhabited by someone knowledgeable about nature's ways and willing to cheerfully answer your pesky questions. Yup, it's a dream come true for this "Why is the sky blue?" kid.

Located down a wandering oak woodlands trail, the Center's building seems unlike standard park fare, with its squat cement base supporting a wood lattice pyramid two stories tall. Inside is an unassuming light-filled room, richly cluttered with natural objects.

I find myself staring at a casually reclining mountain lion, frozen in time. How often can one examine such an animal's details?

Looking around, I see a stuffed quail, fox, coyote, otter, skunk, wild turkey and bufflehead duck. A tousled owl peers down. Today's naturalist, Indio Coffelt, comments that these are all Sonoma County natives, and that mountain lions and coyotes still travel through Santa Rosa's Spring Lake.

At the "habitat table," he shows me a tiny bird's nest, a hornet's nest and a basalt rock piece. The latter, probably "only" 5 million years old, has holes in which animals make their homes. To inspire children's connection with these items, he asks such questions as "Can you imagine building your house with your mouth?" The nearby wall holds "Web of Life" posters and a game board where children place animals in their correct habitat.

Next, at the "touch table," Indio points to a large molten chunk of obsidian, which local tribes mined and traded. He encourages me to try the large, worn stone mortar and pestle, used by natives to make acorn

mush. He muses, "How many hundreds, even thousands, of people did this feed?"

Beneath these seemingly casual displays and conversations is an intentional approach called experiential education (EE), which was Indio's focus area for his Sonoma State environmental studies degree. With EE, he says, people are invited to "do and touch and see and smell," versus what he calls "chalk and talk," or worse, "chalk-dust torture." (I'm amused that even the welcoming of my questions has a technical name: "inquiry-based" or "student-led" learning.)

Feeling my own curiosity stirred, I can see why families, grandparents and scout troops visit here. But one doesn't need a child to come. Anyone could surely occupy hours exploring this information-lush place. Other treasures include a tide pool touch tank, turtle habitat, frog game board, freestanding tree fort, puppet theater, eco-crafts table, silkworms, informational posters and interactive computer games. I even pick up a self-guided nature-walk brochure, with descriptions of native plants.

However, the experience brings more than entertainment. Indio remarks, "I'm helping students of all ages strengthen their relationship to the natural world. We're learning and teaching through nature, the way that humans have done forever but have moved away from. We're all innately deeply rooted in the natural world. It provides anything that you could ever want." I nod, thinking of how nature profoundly nurtures me physically and emotionally, which is my core reason for wanting to honor and protect it.

The Center also hosts morning sessions for elementary school

classes, leading approximately a thousand children a month through such activities as storytelling, projects, hikes and a lifecycle theater. Indio says, "We have a great time." Additionally, the center's naturalists bring their hands-on science out to classrooms.

My eye is drawn to the new painted lady butterfly habitat. Inside, a moth-sized, monarch-orange butterfly, freshly emerged from her cocoon, dries and stretches her crumpled wings under the "sun" heat lamp. A butterfly lifecycle poster echoes small models on the table. "Butterflies and dragonflies live short, magical lives," Indio observes. "They fly and spread their magic and good luck around, lay eggs, then pass on. And their offspring will continue to do the same—the big cycle."

When I smile, he adds, "There's tons of magic in the natural world." He tells me of a conversation he once had at Nashville State. Physics professor Art Ward was explaining the technical science of the shimmering aurora borealis when Indio cried out, "Wait, you're killing it!" Ward calmly replied, "Just because you can explain it scientifically, doesn't mean it isn't still magic."

The Environmental Discovery Center is located inside Spring Lake Park adjacent to the main parking lot, 391 Violetti Drive, Santa Rosa. Hours are Wednesday–Sunday, noon–5pm. Entry is free; parking is \$5–\$6. The current exhibit, 'Habitat and Home,' continues through Jan. 4. More info is at www.sonoma-county.org/parks/edc.htm or call 707.539.2865.

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