

Conservation Biology for Kids

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This roadrunner is one of the animals the kids might see on the grounds at CNUW.

A marvelous program at Scottsdale Community College teaches children about the biodiversity of the Sonoran Desert. The Center for Native and Urban Wildlife or CNUW is a favorite field trip for valley 4th graders. Designed to meet curriculum standards for science, the program immerses children in their own natural environment, something that many see only from the window of a speeding car.

Over 6000 valley children have toured CNUW, where they start out at Toad Hall. Inside this classroom they find live animals like chuckwallas, desert iguana, leopard frogs, snakes and Gila monsters. A colorful wall

mural illustrates the interdependence between the animals and the plants of the desert. The children are free to read displays and examine the critters.

Next they visit the Wildlife Demonstration Garden where they see the rarest of Sonoran habitats, a wetland. Around the pond they observe the dramatic increase in biodiversity that comes with water. In the garden they are taught that every desert plant has a unique relationship with the area birds, reptiles, mammals and insects. They learn that planting a native species saves water and provides homes and food for desert animals.

The third stop in the tour is a demonstration by the Liberty Wildlife Foundation. The children get an up close look at several birds of prey, and learn about their role in the desert. The children's reaction to the hawks, owls and vultures is electric. They have many questions and stories to relate about their sightings of desert birds. Liberty echoes the CNUW message: these creatures are part of the desert and so are you. It is up to all of us to help minimize the impact that humanity has on this fragile environment.

CNUW's conservation biology education outreach was developed in 2000 as a partnership between the biology department at Scottsdale Community College, the McDowell Sonoran Land Trust and the City of Scottsdale. The Land Trust needed professional help with desert restoration projects, and the City of Scottsdale was interested in a program to teach elementary students about Sonoran biodiversity. Together the groups obtained a Nina Mason Pulliam Trust Grant. SCC Biology Professor Roy Barnes is at the helm of CNUW and he is passionate about the mission. "People are not aware of the loss and importance of biodiversity," he says. "When I was a child wild animals, birds, bugs, snakes, lizards and worms were a big part of my life. They enriched my life, and I want to make sure all children have that chance of enrichment."

Avid conservation biology students volunteer as docents for the CNUW tours, and

help Professor Barnes maintain a large greenhouse to support desert restoration projects. Arizona Game and Fish also calls on CNUW to serve as a refugium for threatened species. Currently CNUW is raising a captive population of lowland leopard frogs from the Cave Creek area. In case this desert population dips below a viable level, CNUW will be ready to give it a boost.

In these times of rampant growth and development, we can be grateful that someone like Roy Barnes is standing up for the other side. There isn't any money to be made in his endeavors, and less money to support them, but you can bet they are of utmost importance to us all.

Courtesy of Liberty Wildlife

www.libertywildlife.org/