

Volunteers needed to venture into the wild

College's Center for Native, Urban Wildlife seeks tour guides

By Tony Natale
SCOTTSDALE VIEWS

A growing interest among Arizona schools to visit the Center for Native and Urban Wildlife at Scottsdale Community College is creating a demand for more volunteer docents.

The Center received 1,500 touring students, mostly fourth-graders, from schools throughout the state last year, said Mark Harding, assistant director.

"We expect more than 2,000 students next school year," Harding said. "That's why we need more volunteer docents."

Volunteer docents act as tour guides, taking groups of students to at least four locations on campus - a greenhouse, a garden, a learning center commonly called "Toad Hall" and a desert plant yard.

Docents are expected to conduct tour groups of a dozen or more students for about two hours a month.

The center, dedicated to preserving and restoring the Sonoran Desert habitat for both plants and animals, opened two years ago.

Since then, students from Scottsdale and the East Valley have enjoyed the various exhibits and lectures, Harding said.

"We've gotten more requests for tours since receiving our latest honor," he said, referring to the center being named the 2002 Teaching and Learning Innovation of the Year by the National Council of Instructional Administrators.

The center uses both SCC students as well as volunteers to conduct tours. Students are paid, while volunteers receive other benefits.

"I get a great sense of satisfaction working with younger students," said Neil MacKay, an instructor at SCC whose students are usually age 18 and older.

"It's not only fun for me, but it's important for (students) to learn," said MacKay, who volunteers his time freely to lead tours.

Another volunteer, Patricia Quinn-Ortiz, said her payment is helping young children enjoy nature.

"Preserving wildlife is something I've been involved in for many years, and it's a good excuse to share my time and knowledge with the kids," Quinn-Ortiz said.

New docents receive training during the summer school break to prepare for the coming school year when tours resume.

Toad Hall is the hub of activities for young visitors and offers live animal displays and exhibits that help students learn about Sonoran Desert wildlife.

It also contains endangered species and animals that are no longer found in Arizona.

At the greenhouse, or vivarium, visitors see native plants, lizards, desert tortoises and amphibians. In the spring, they can enjoy rows of blooming wildflowers and learn how plants pollinate.

The desert plant yard, or propagation yard, is filled with mesquite, palo verde and other tree species.

"The biggest challenge our volunteer docents face is handling a bunch of curious youngsters," Harding said. "They don't have to be experts in biodiversity."

Volunteer docents can choose to lead tours on either Tuesdays, Wednesdays or Thursdays.

Tour groups rotate at each of the four facilities and conclude the tour with lunch and a lecture by an SCC staff member.

The tour ends with a traditional toad-calling contest - a contest among students who can best imitate the sound of a particular toad or frog. Winners receive bandanas.

The center also provides field trips for older students as well as guest lecturers for area schools.

At present, there are about a dozen volunteer docents, but at least six more are needed for the coming school year, Harding said.

The current guides are mostly retired Scottsdale residents who enjoy the outdoors and serving the community.

-Reporter Tony Natale can be reached by email at tnatale@aztrib.com or by calling (480) 970-2375. Fax: (480) 970-2323.

Caption: Aztec Elementary School fourth- and fifth-grade students peer into a pond on the campus of Scottsdale Community College. The pond is part of the college's Center for Native and Urban Wildlife.

Photo 2

Caption: Patricia Quinn-Ortiz prepares to lead students from Aztec Elementary School around the Center for Native and Urban Wildlife on the campus of Scottsdale Community College.

Photo 1