



Tamalpais Valley students study their backyard

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Last week, a group of 80 fifth-graders from Tamalpais Valley School hiked from their classroom to the Marin Headlands for outdoor science education at Headlands Institute, a campus of nonprofit **NatureBridge**, which connects youth to the natural world. The students explored the national park and engaged in hands-on learning about local ecosystems and human impacts on the headlands.

Hiking to Headlands Institute has become a tradition for Tamalpais Valley fifth-graders. On a trip up Hill 88 at the institute four years ago, students were excited to see their school in the valley below them. The following year, the fifth-grade classes decided to hike to the institute instead of driving, and they've been doing it ever since, teacher Catherine Patler said.

"We want them to fall in love with this area and help preserve it," she said.



At the NatureBridge campus, students learned about the impacts humans have on the headlands. A group of students hiked to Rodeo Pond, where they discussed the pond's watershed and caught water-dwelling bugs to study the pond's health. Bringing their samples back to the institute's science lab, students identified the bugs and used them to determine the water quality in the pond. Finding that the pond didn't hold very many bugs that require unpolluted water to live, students said they learned that the pond's health was OK, but not good.

NatureBridge field science educator Heather Richard led the students on an exploration of the headlands' history. Richard explained how each of the groups that inhabit the headlands affects the area in a different way. Hearing about how the area was almost developed into a city, some of the fifth-graders said they thought becoming a national park was the best thing that ever happened to the headlands.

Students said they learned many new things about the area in which they live. "I never knew we had otters here," said Stella, a Tamalpais Valley student, on seeing the animals swimming and diving in Rodeo Lagoon.

Aaron Rich is the director of NatureBridge's Headlands Institute.