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Training next generation of environmental stewards

The students from Carole Goyen's fifth-grade class at Berkeley's Cragmont Elementary celebrated Earth Day this year with a three-day walk in the woods.

"It's a time of spring that everyone should experience."

"I want to hike, have fun, learn things and do stuff," said

Peter Madden, a smiling 11-year-old. "That's why we're here to learn about nature and the environment."

Well, young man, you've come to the right place.

The Headlands Institute, located in the rolling hills outside of Sausalito, has offered such experiences to students

since 1977. The institute hosts more than 10,000 students each year.

The institute is part of NatureBridge, an environmental education nonprofit that operates outdoor classrooms in four national parks, including the Golden Gate.

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National Recreation Area. The institute and NatureBridge's national headquarters are based in military buildings once used as part of Fort Cronkhite, a World War II-era post that housed a Nike missile site before it was decommissioned in the early 1970s.

The other three parks served by NatureBridge are Yosemite, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, and Olympic in Washington state.

Campfire gatherings

This week, the Headlands Institute hosted groups from Los Perales Elementary School in Moraga, a group of high school students from Huntington Beach (Orange County), and the Berkeley students. All the kids mingle around a campfire each night.

Students are split into teams of about 15 people and spend their days hiking trails, exploring the nearby lagoon and interacting with the environment around them. In addition to traditional campfire gatherings, students take a night hike without flashlights and a trip to the beach to watch bioluminescent plankton wash ashore. They examine rock outcroppings and learn about geology. The institute has a "skins and skulls" lab where students learn about anthropology and the anatomical structure of a golden eagle, a red-tailed hawk, a bobcat and a mountain lion.

Inspiration for writing

Veteran instructor Ingrid Apter told her team, who named themselves the "Hammerheads," to let their eyes guide their hands as they traced the outlines of different animals in the room.

When I asked Anjali Arreola-Buri, 11, what excited her most about the classroom field trip, her answer could have come from John Muir himself.

"I was hoping to see nature that would inspire me to write poems and stories," she said.

"You want to write for the newspaper?" I asked. "Books," she replied.

Next door is a Marine biology lab where students hold 25 different species of living sea creatures, such as starfish and tiny crabs.

In addition to instilling an abiding respect for nature, the program is also designed to help create "the next generation of environmental stewards," said Aaron Rich, the institute's director.

For some inner-city kids, a three-day stay at the institute is their first experience beyond the asphalt, concrete-covered places they call home, said Goyen, who has brought five classes to the institute in 12 years.

"I often get students who live in Oakland and Richmond — and they are really afraid of being outside," she said.

In a world more and more defined by artificial structures, from the asphalt under our feet, to the concrete above our heads, to the latest technology devices permanently glued to our hands, programs that give kids a peek at a world beyond their own — the natural world all around them — will only become more valuable over time.

Chip Johnson's column appears in The Chronicle on Tuesday and Friday. E-mail him at chipjohnson@sfchronicle.com.



LIU HAFALIA / THE CHRONICLE

Fifth-graders from Berkeley's Cragmont Elementary walk the hills next to the Headlands Institute in Sausalito on Wednesday.



Above: Matthew Mendoza (front) and Francesca Lorente walk in unison at the Headlands Institute. Left: Instructor Matt Kohn of the Headlands Institute leads the Berkeley students.