



Summer Camp Programs Teach Children Valuable Lessons About the World in Which They Live

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The summer sun beckons school children and lures office workers outside to play in its warmth. The Bay Area, being such a beautiful place, only magnifies this desire. For children and adolescents, there are many opportunities to spend the summer outside, being with and learning about the world around them.

For instance, in the folds of Muir Beach there is a ranch that sustains itself and offers lessons to others in the process. Children run in the gardens and milk the cows. They make yarn and other crafts. Welcome to Slide Ranch, a nonprofit organization dedicated to environmental education. At Slide Ranch summer camp, children ages 5-12 learn about their connections to the earth. Through a variety of educational programs, the staff and visitors investigate how the ranch acts as a small community whose members work together for survival.

While nine residential instructors scramble eggs, gulp milk and sauté vegetables produced on-site, Slide Ranch actually sustains itself with income from its environmental education programs, including summer camps.

The teachers lead small groups of children on a broad range of activities, learning about sustainability and how this principle affects the ranch's operations. The children explore the ranch and engage in activities that are crucial to the function of the farm, such as cooking, gardening and milking the cows.

"It is a way to get in touch with where your food comes from and an opportunity to explore and make connections to how our lives fit into nature," said staff member and teacher Rachael Brown.

Another fun and educational program for local students even pays its participants. The summer program of the Marin Conservation Corps, Project Regeneration, provides middle and high school students with an opportunity to learn about the environment and earn some money while they're at it. The camp is focused on recreation and field trips, environmental education and community service. Middle school students receive a stipend of \$300 for four weeks, and high school students, \$500.

The camp benefits the entire region just as much as the hands-on participants, perhaps more so. Community service projects include removing non-native plants from various sites throughout Marin County, helping with a sand crab monitoring project for the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, and working with the Teen Environmental Media Network to produce short radio segments on the topic of recycling.

Though the application process, which begins in January of every year, is quite rigorous, the program is a lot of fun.

“It’s been a great way to meet peers from different schools,” said Amanda Wagner, a Project Regeneration participant.

Wagner, like all 120 participants this summer, spent seven hours a day, five days a week, working and exploring with other high school students. As a result, the four-week program fosters a close-knit atmosphere.

“They do a lot of recreation [activities], but the main thing that they do is learn about the environment and then serve the community and the environment in Marin,” said Sandy Miles, Project Regeneration program director, who added that she believes Project Regeneration is unique due to its focus on community service.

WildCare, an animal shelter located in San Rafael, offers Terwilliger Nature Camps during the summer for children ages 3-12. Though the children are not allowed to physically handle the animals, they are able to see the wild birds and small mammals that are brought to the shelter. Activities include making crafts, hiking, story telling and playing games, all with an orientation toward learning about nature. Different topics correspond with different weeks of the camp, such as Creepy Crawlers, Junior Herpetologists and Barefoot by the Sea.

“The availability of wild animals” is the special quality of this camp, according to Julie Malet, Wild Care’s educational coordinator.

The shelter is a good choice for children who care about animals. Environmental summer camps provide children and adolescents with the opportunity to spend the summer outdoors and open up to the world around them. They not only benefit the participants, but also the community and, camp educators hope, the health of the earth.