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Wednesday, May 16, 2007



Wade Belew, right, stewardship coordinator of Cotati Creek Critters, demonstrates planting to students from Roseland Elementary School on their stewardship field trip with Acorn SOUPE, an environmental education organization organization. The event was hosted by the Cotati Creek Critters Tuesday along the Laguna channel in Cotati.
Melissa Konkel

Planting the seeds of stewardship

By Betti Faust

"What's the magic word?" Johnny Ehlers of Acorn SOUPE energetically asked 18 third grade students from Santa Rosa's Roseland Elementary circled up in Ladybug Park.

"Starship!" yelled one enthusiastic boy, bundled up against the chill and winds of Tuesday morning.

"You're close, it starts with an 'S' and ends with 'ship'," he reminded them.

"Stewardship" is the magic word and the key concept that this group of environmental educators is trying to convey to students in Sonoma and Napa county schools.

Asked to explain to the group what they think stewardship means, many of the third graders in Danielle Yount's class flung their arms up in the air and said, "Being a friend!" "Orange juice!" and "Planting trees!"

Acorn SOUPE is a nonprofit corporation that teaches kindergarten through twelfth graders about nature, wildlife, and habitat, and how people make decisions and take actions that affect the homes of the plants and animals that we share our ecosystems with.

"What do all animals need in their habitat?" Ehlers inquired of the group. Yount's students have been studying animal habitats in class for the last month. Together the students and leaders came up with "water," "shelter," "food," "air," and "space."

For this group of bilingual Latino students and four chaperone parents, these key words were shouted out in Spanish too: "agua," "protección," "comida," "aire" and "espacio."

Through hands-on activities aligned with state curriculum standards, the naturalists at Acorn SOUPE teach leadership and decision making skills that benefit the environment. Naturalist Dian Redalia believes that the positive influence Acorn SOUPE has on students becomes more and more apparent as they consistently work with a school for multiple years.

Over the course of a year, each participating class experiences five Acorn SOUPE encounters.

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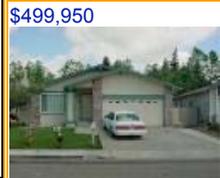
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The first is a classroom visit that lays the conceptual foundation. This is followed by three fieldtrips, each with a distinct focus on life cycles, watersheds, or stewardship. The last encounter is again in the classroom where the naturalists reinforce and integrate everything the students have learned.

On this day the class was in Cotati to plant native trees and shrubs along the Laguna de Santa Rosa with Jenny Blaker and Wade Belew of the Cotati Creek Critters. In the past, Acorn SOUPE has come out to the Critters' site about once a year, but this school year Acorn SOUPE has brought about seven classes to the Critters with the help of grant funding from the Community Foundation of Sonoma County.

Kneeling on the Laguna's bank, Blaker explained to the students that it is "really, really important that the soil in the pot be level with the soil in the ground... because the tree has to have its roots under the ground."

To reinforce the point, Ehlers said, "We can plant 1,000 trees wrong, or one tree right. So which do you want to do?"

"A thousand right!!!" one boy yelled out above the din of others mumbling the expected answer of "one right."

Blaker then demonstrated how to put down the cardboard mulch the Critters use to keep weeds down, and pound in the wooden stakes that visually indicate where plants are to protect them when grass is mowed. The stakes are strategically placed upstream to catch floating debris that might harm the young plants when the Laguna's water level is high.

"Who plays football?" Ehlers asked. "It's like a blocker in football, it makes sure nothing can tackle the tree."

After receiving instruction on safe and proper tool use, the students were paired up in groups of two with a pre-dug hole, a tree, cardboard and stakes. They eagerly took to the task; hands in ridiculously oversized gloves worked as deftly as possible and the words shared among them fluidly slipped between English and Spanish.

"I work with kids because I love teaching kids about the earth, and in this system it is the most sustainable thing I can do," said Matt Gunter. He has been an environmental educator for nine years and has worked with Acorn SOUPE for one.

"Our life support systems won't be able to support us because of our lack of knowledge on how they support us." This truth has become all more "ruggedly apparent," Gunter says, with the recent birth of his first child.

"Environmental change only comes from knowledge. Knowledge and connection," he said.

Knowledge and connection seems to be what Acorn SOUPE is all about. Through knowledge the organization connects kids to the outdoors, their environment, wildlife and habitats, soil, worms, trees, creeks, Critters, birds, lizards, each other, and much, much more.

Yount is in her second year of teaching at Roseland, and this is her first year of partnering with Acorn SOUPE. "The kids have learned so much about nature that they wouldn't have learned if I hadn't joined this organization," she said.

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