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# Sharing the wonders of the coastal waters



A budding birder used borrowed binoculars to get a closer look at distant wildlife. (Luis Melecio-Zambrano — Herald Correspondent)

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MOSS LANDING — The group of schoolchildren peered over the railing of the



On this recent trip to Elkhorn Slough, they stared transfixed at a bird on the surface of the still waters, murmuring in anticipation. In a sudden flash of brown and white, an otter breached out of the slough, grasping its flailing, feathered lunch in its paws. On the boat, onlookers squealed, cheered and gasped. One of them said simply: “It’s the circle of life.”

The group of 18 Latino fifth through eighth grades from Soledad and Greenfield came to the slough as part of a trip with the Monterey Waterkeeper’s Central Coast Water Leaders program. The experience aims to connect the children to Monterey’s coastal waters, teach them about its ecosystem and make memories that inspire them to preserve it.



Students watch as rain, simulated with a spray bottle, carries pollution across their paper landscapes. (Luis Melecio-Zambrano — Herald Correspondent)

“We all depend on clean water to thrive,” says Chelsea Tu, executive director of Monterey Waterkeeper, a nonprofit focused on water conservation and education. “The ultimate goal for the Central Coast Water Leaders Program is to inspire our next generation of water leaders so that they can really, truly personally see the connections among all of our waters.”



The program started when Monterey Waterkeeper won a Whale Tail grant from the California Coastal Commission to bring underserved students out on educational trips to coastal waters. Tu then reached out to the Wahine Project. The Monterey-based nonprofit offers reduced-cost surfing lessons and has hosted free coastal trips for children out of Gonzales and Soledad. The partnership allowed Tu to take advantage of Wahine's existing connections while enabling Wahine to expand its programming to include conservation and environmental education.

Recently their joint efforts brought the school kids on a guided boat tour of Elkhorn Slough's wildlife. The tour took the students past docks of barking sea lions, terns swooping into the water for fish and 4-foot-long Pacific sea nettle jellies drifting through the slough.

Along the way, naturalist Helaina Lindsey of Monterey Eco Tours doled out knowledge about each of the species. In return, inquisitive students peppered her with questions. They pointed to critters and asked what they were named, checking off lists of bird species in dry-erase marker.



Students and chaperones peered into the slough to glimpse otters and other marine life. (Luis Melecio-Zambrano — Herald Correspondent)

The favorite lesson for many of the students took place in the form of the bird-eating otter, affectionately dubbed the “birderer.” Otters are the top predator in their ecosystem, explained Lindsey, despite their cute appearance. While eating birds is unusual behavior, some of the furry carnivores won't resist a protein-rich meal.



After their time on the boat, the students bussed over to Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve to learn about water conservation. By dousing little paper models of mountains and valleys, they demonstrated the way that rain carries pollutants on land into rivers and eventually out to sea. On a brief hike, they took in a panorama of the slough. Looking over the surrounding lands, they discussed how nearby farms changed their plowing patterns to prevent pesticide and fertilizer runoff. Then they demonstrated how wetlands absorb flood waters and help filter out pollutants.

For some of the students, this was their first visit to the slough or even visiting the coast, despite living less than an hour away. For kids from the Salinas Valley, especially Latinos, this is the norm, says Dionne Ybarra, founder of the Wahine Project.

A 2016 study out of Stanford University came to similar conclusions. Latinos are vastly underrepresented in coastal areas, making up about half as much of coastal populations as they do in the rest of the state. This limits access to coastal resources, especially for lower-income families.



Students save a paper watershed from blowing away in a rogue breeze. (Luis Melecio-Zambrano — Herald Correspondent)



For Tu, this is personal. She remembers being exposed to “the wonders of nature” with her family at a young age as the child of low-income immigrant parents. Witnessing how pollution threatened those natural resources “really instilled in me this kind of personal stake in wanting to protect our ecosystems and wanting to make sure that everybody has clean water,” says Tu.

That message on conservation has special relevance to the students and their communities. According to the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, Soledad ranks in the top half of the state for drinking water contaminants and pesticide pollution risks.

Ybarra says she hopes the trips will inspire students to combat those disparities by taking office and serving on water boards. However, she also admits that the program is limited. “We’re taking ... 18 kids,” she says. “Eighteen. We’re still falling short of what ... needs to be reached.” The Soledad Unified School District has over 5,000 students, those 18 represent less than 1% of that group.

However, Tu and Ybarra plan on expanding the Waters Leaders program and continuing trips to the slough for years to come. By the end of 2024, they aim to reach 220 students with their message of conservation.

Until then, these 18 children can take away their experience with these protected waters.

For Eli Lopez, a sixth grader from San Vicente Elementary, that experience inspired a moment of quiet contemplation. Looking over the wetlands from the catamaran, he smiles, and says, “This is nice: the nature, no cities. It’s beautiful.”





The students modeled the contours of a watershed using crumpled paper and hand-drawn towns. (Luis Melecio-Zambrano — Herald Correspondent)

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