



Saguaro National Park's **Education Corps** **Program**

Employing local teachers as Park Rangers to lead park-based experiences for young people, fostering the development of their personal connection with nature and the park

Program Mission

The intent of the Education Corps Ranger program at Saguaro National Park is to provide increased opportunities for under-served and under-represented young people to make a personal connection to nature and the park through repeat visits to the park. Teachers from the Tucson area will be employed to lead young people on various place-based, traditional park activities such as hiking, camping, and picnicking throughout the cooler months of the year. Once young people have been exposed to traditional park activities and developed a

connection to the park, they will be encouraged to join the park's year round Cactus Ranger program providing a continuing relationship with the park for years to come.



Figure 1: Education Corps Teachers group photo.

Additionally, providing passionate teachers with an opportunity for them to connect to nature and experience the park will further develop their personal relationship with the park and the NPS, fostering a relationship with students and families from their school and community. The program focuses on teachers from schools that have diverse student populations, who have had no experience with national parks, or little opportunity to explore the relevance these areas can have in the lives of their students and families.

Teachers recruited from the Tucson area who are familiar with challenges education faces locally as well as the barriers that impede young people and their families from connecting them with the park will review, improve, and develop a broad array of environmental education programs offered by the park based on their experience as Education Rangers. Their experience as Tucson teachers and the park based activities they lead will help guide the park towards greater relevance within the community thus contributing to the preservation and protection of the park in the future.

Background

The challenge for the National Park Service (NPS) is to provide opportunities for all Americans to connect to their national heritage as embodied by national parks. The Education Corps program focuses on the education community and engages teachers from schools that are not currently being reached with park programs, paying particular attention to areas with large, ethnically diverse populations. This program hopes to offer additional opportunities for these populations to connect to the resources of their national parks and to increase the relevance of National Parks to local communities surrounding those parks.

Teachers are employed as park rangers to parks through Friends of Saguaro National Park as independent contractors and are then detailed to the park. This program links Saguaro National Park and teachers from Tucson's under-served urban and rural school districts. Teachers will work intermittently throughout the year with a focus on the cooler months when temperatures are more conducive to providing the opportunity to lead young people on various adventures throughout the park. The park will employ the teachers at \$15.00 and provide them with a uniform. Education Corps Rangers will develop and lead traditional field based programs for young people over repeat visits such as the Hiking Clubs, family picnics and camping activities, youth camping trips, and backpacking trips. Teachers will also lead Wilderness Camps and Junior Ranger Camps in both districts. They may also develop and/or review curriculum-based materials for the park, lead Teacher Appreciation Nights, and assist with teacher workshops soliciting feedback on our programs. Teachers may also write and submit small grants to support their classrooms visit to the park. During the school year, Education Corps Rangers may bring their classroom to the park for a field trip as well. In April, during National Park Week, Education Corps Rangers will wear their NPS uniforms to school, discuss their experiences as a park ranger, and engage students and other teachers in activities that relate to America's national parks.

Concepts Learned and Incorporated From the Field into the Classroom

This place-based experience provides more opportunities for Education Corps Rangers and their students and families to deeply connect with park resources and to make their own personal connections to Saguaro National Park and other National Parks. Exposure to our American heritage offers all of them a chance to gain a better understanding of civic engagement, of the relevance these places have for all Americans, and of the diversity of sites that have been set aside by and for the American people. Teacher-Rangers learn about the complexities of interpreting and researching cultural resources. For example, Teacher-Rangers learn how:

Many Education Corps Rangers will work in parks with significant natural resources. For example, Education Corps Rangers learn how:

- a variety of resources can be used for research, and how these resources will be used to tell complex stories from a variety of viewpoints;
- to increase their understanding of scientific research and the complex issues related to these resources;
- scientific research is performed, applied and interpreted by students on park field trips;
- science in parks relates to urban areas and issues;

- to apply National Park Service mission ethics to resource management decisions;
- the public becomes involved in the decision-making process;
- a variety of partners contribute to projects being researched in the park;
- parks manage funds and delineate schedules and how various aspects of park projects can be accomplished.
- adjacent lands that may or may not be managed under similar resource management philosophies affect park project outcomes;
- parks research and interpret American Indian heritage and regularly consult with tribes who have a government-to-government relationship with the park and its resources;

Benefits of Being an Education Corps Rangers

Participating Education Corps Rangers have the opportunity to develop a personal connection with Saguaro National Park's resources, both front country and backcountry, year-round. By working intermittently, year-round, teachers are able to more effectively integrate their experience as a park ranger into their busy personal and professional lives, providing a more comprehensive, holistic, and personal experience.

These Education Corps Rangers develop a wide array of teaching examples based on real life experience in parks and create "curricula enhancers" that highlight issues surrounding heritage conservation.

Education Corps Rangers become life-long friends of Saguaro National Park and the National Park Service and teach an ethic of heritage conservation to students and their families, both in the field and the schools, where much of America's future resides.

Program Benefits to Urban School Children and Their Families

This program provides the opportunity for under-represented and under-served youth and their families to connect personally to the nation's heritage through their own park-based experiences in Saguaro National Park lead by their Teacher-Ranger.

A variety of resource issues, based on the student's personal experience during their visits to the park, are discussed in class. These might include citizen science, interpretation, fire, exotic species, endangered species, air and water issues, and climate change.

Students learn about opportunities for participation in the Cactus Rangers, job shadowing, internships, AmeriCorps and the SCA, and seasonal or permanent employment with the National Park Service.

Students share their enthusiasm based upon personal, placed-based experiences with their teacher who has had the opportunity to be a National Park Ranger.