

Becoming Citizens of Our Own Land: A Photo Essay

Steven Henley and Michelle Jewett

The following pages provide a visual narrative of one fifth grade class as they explore and connect to their natural world. This example of Place-Based Education (PBE) is part of a district and community program that has provided outdoor environmental education at the same location to Albuquerque-area students for over fifty years. On this particular day, we follow a group of bilingual students, their teacher, and parent chaperones as they move from elementary school, to mountain, to school again. Over a six-hour period, we shift from a metaphorically "placeless" standardized or universal curriculum that is often within our schools (Sobel), to a specific geographical place and time that is unique to the region and environment of New Mexico's Sandia Mountains.

These photos tell a specific story about one day on one trail, and in doing so, model Tuck and McKenzie's precept that place matters and place is always specific. By providing students with the necessary time and space to deepen their empathic connections to local land, their natural environment, and the non-human world (Gruenewald) this lived experience moves students toward critical conversations about their relationship with nature. It is our belief that students can carry this visceral and holistic relationship that is the ecosystem of the Sandias outward, from mountain and school, to neighborhood and community, and beyond.



Barriers, like fences, are ubiquitous in schools.

In contrast, students experience exactly one fence at SNMHC: the front entrance gate. Instead of fences, natural landmarks will act as boundaries for the day: those three tall ponderosas, that big lichen-covered rock, or the steep edge of the trail.

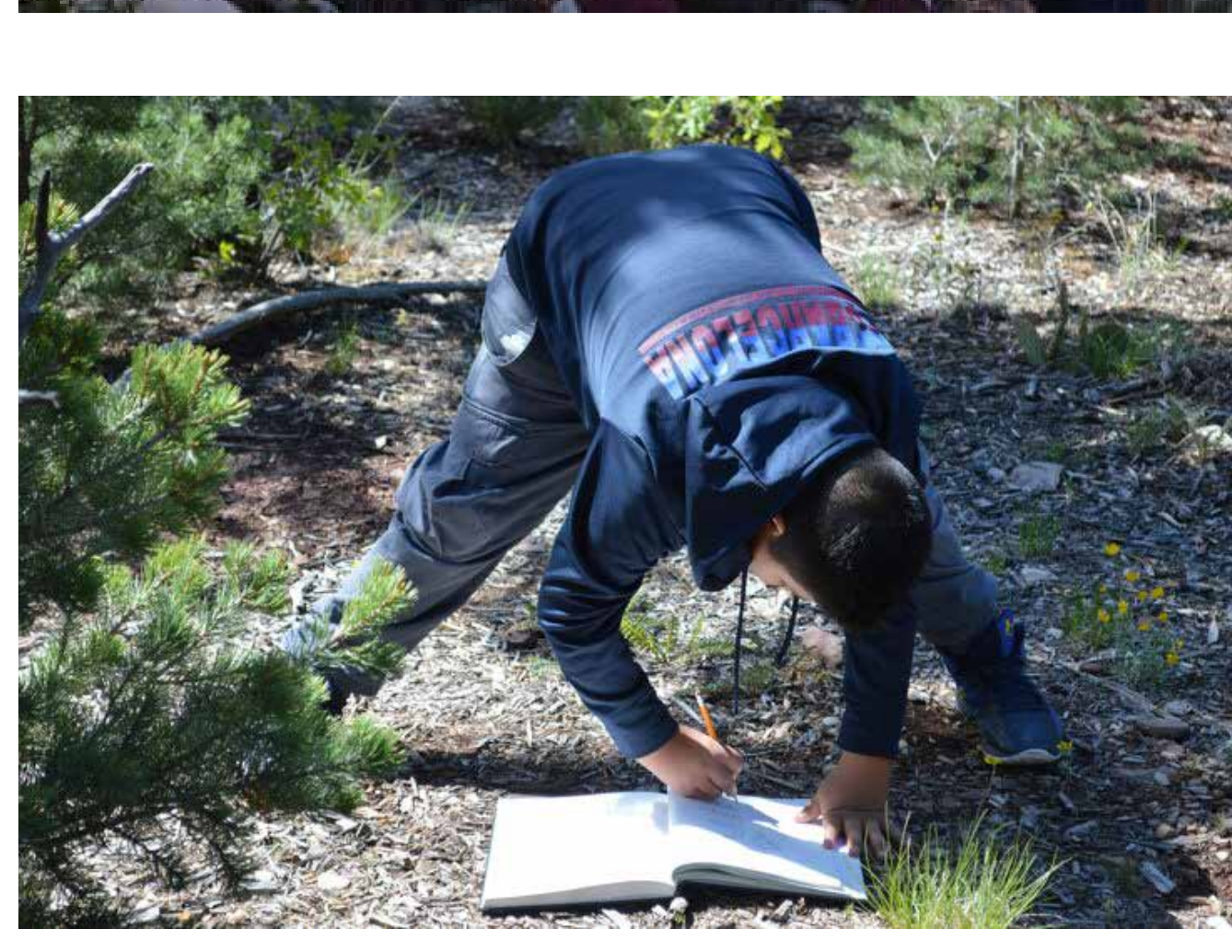
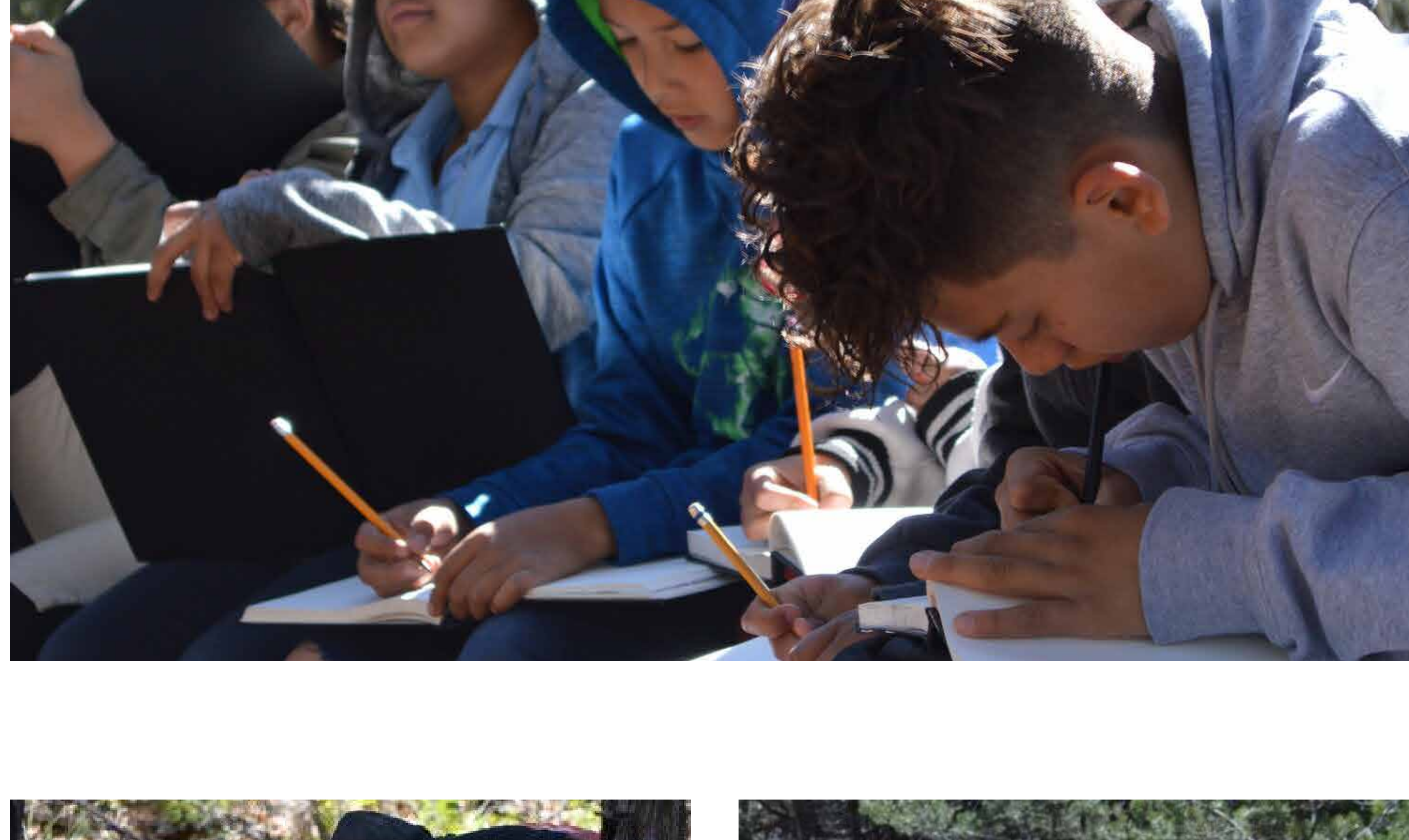


Before the hike, students use the restroom, stow lunches, and instructors give the spiel about trail safety and layout of the day. Student questions and comments at this time often serve as first indicators of their varying degrees of outdoor experience; some expressing authentic fear of wildlife and others true excitement.

This resident bobcat was photographed within days of the students' hike. It stands about 10 yards from where the students are standing in the neighboring photo. Though unlikely to see a bobcat, students regularly find their tracks, illustrating the common use of the land.



The first stop is an outdoor classroom where the instructor introduces (or reviews) key concepts related to ecosystems since this terminology will be used throughout the day.



The kids are eager to explore.



While searching for the biotic and abiotic elements that compose this ecosystem, they share, confer, and record their findings.



Trail camera image of bear relaxing in Mud Spring.

Using an identification key, these boys are studying the morphology and location of a lichen specimen to determine its species.



A family of four mountain lions drinking at Mud Spring. Our students pass within feet of this spot today.



Over the course of the day, students become more comfortable and at home in the outdoors.

Students explore using all their senses. Here, students are smelling a Ponderosa Pine to see if it smelled like "vanilla" as the instructor said.



The class enters the Cibola National Forest. A memorandum of understanding with the Forest Service allows for regular trail access beyond the center's 128 acres.

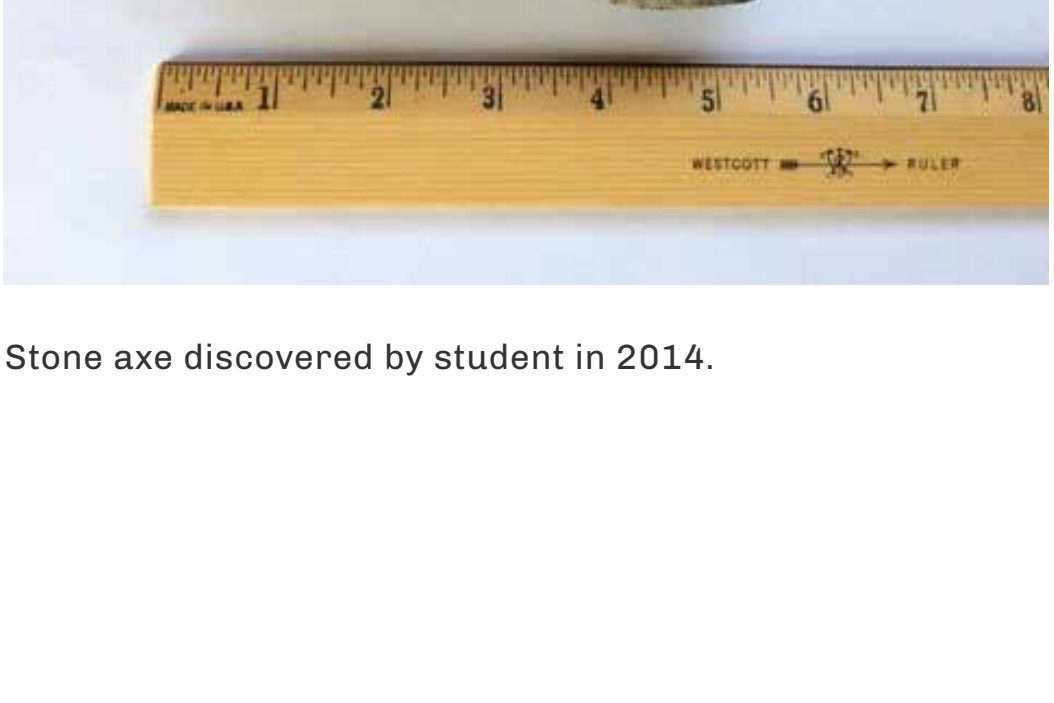


Entering designated wilderness land.

Kids are natural discoverers. When given the space and freedom, kids can find what's remained unseen for hundreds of years, gaining insight of human life from long ago.



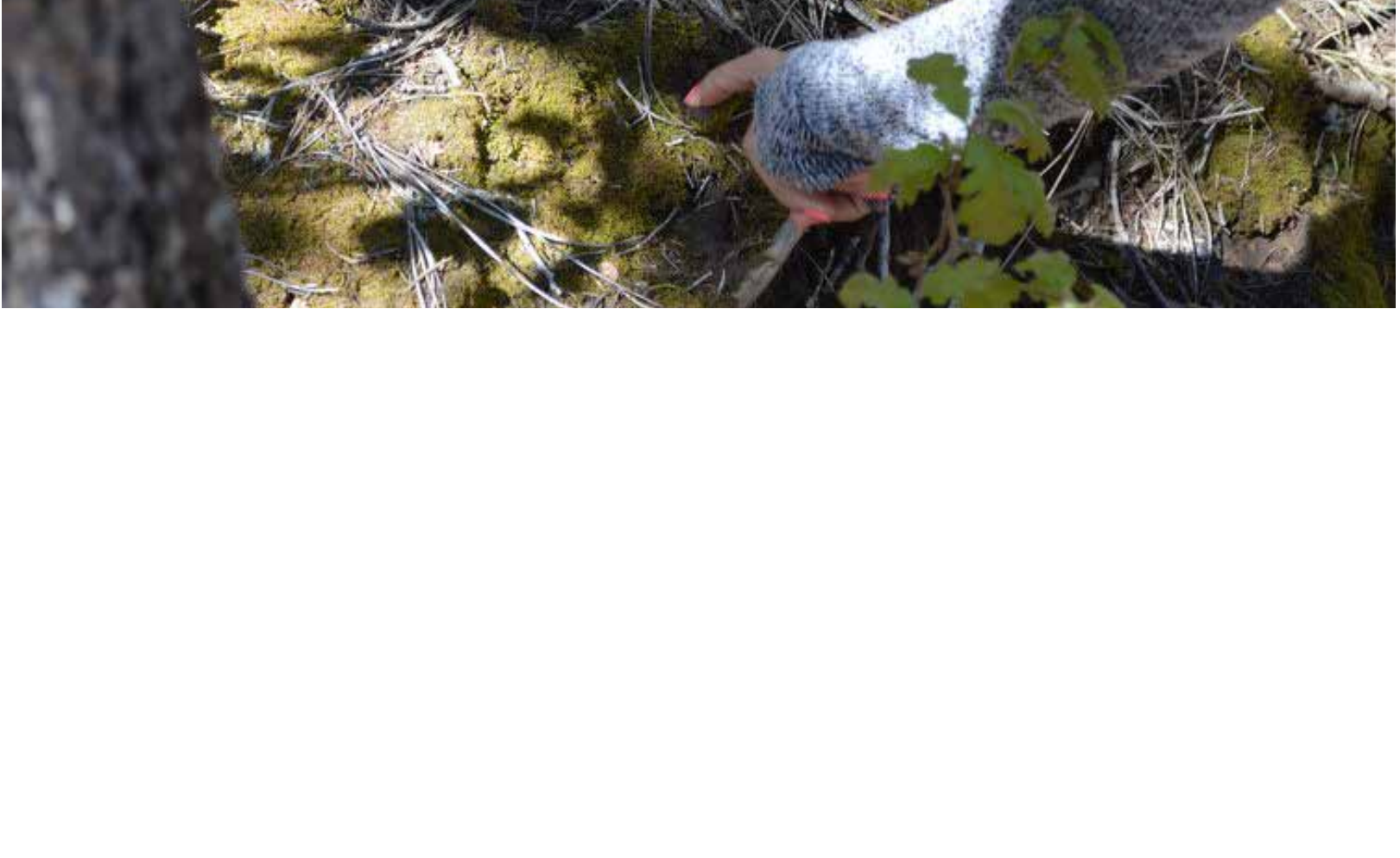
It's not uncommon for students to find pottery fragments.



Stone axe discovered by student in 2014.



Students find consumer evidence. This bear scat contains seeds which are seasonally available, allowing the kids to determine how recently the animal may have been in the area.

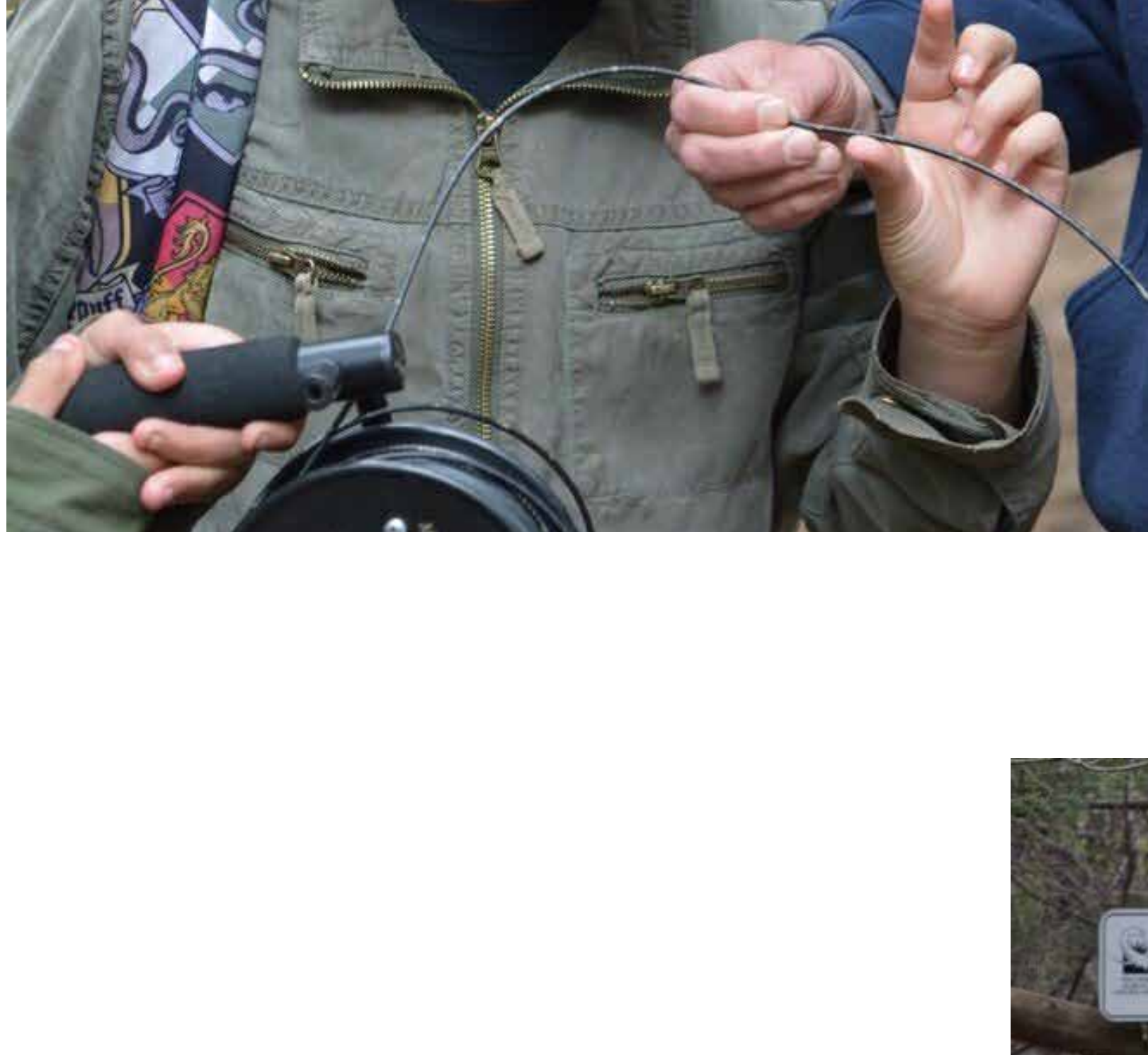


Observing the niche moss occupies within the forest ecosystem.



Students examine strawberry plants along the trail.

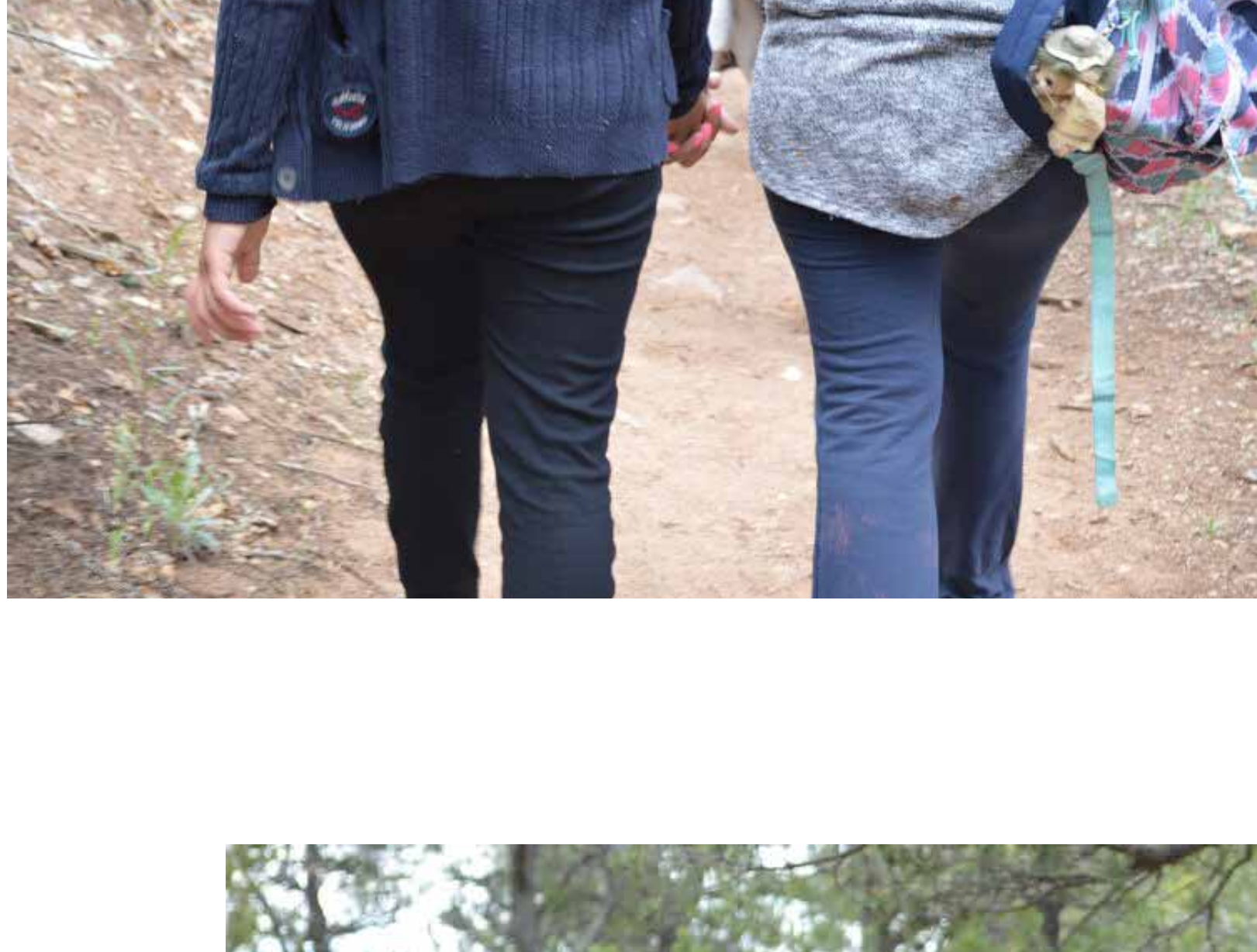
More consumer evidence. This time students encounter turkey feathers in addition to several bobcat tracks; clues are compiled and connections made.



Using a water level meter to measure subsurface water level at Paradise Spring, this student collects data which is then recorded by center staff to monitor the decline of the spring.



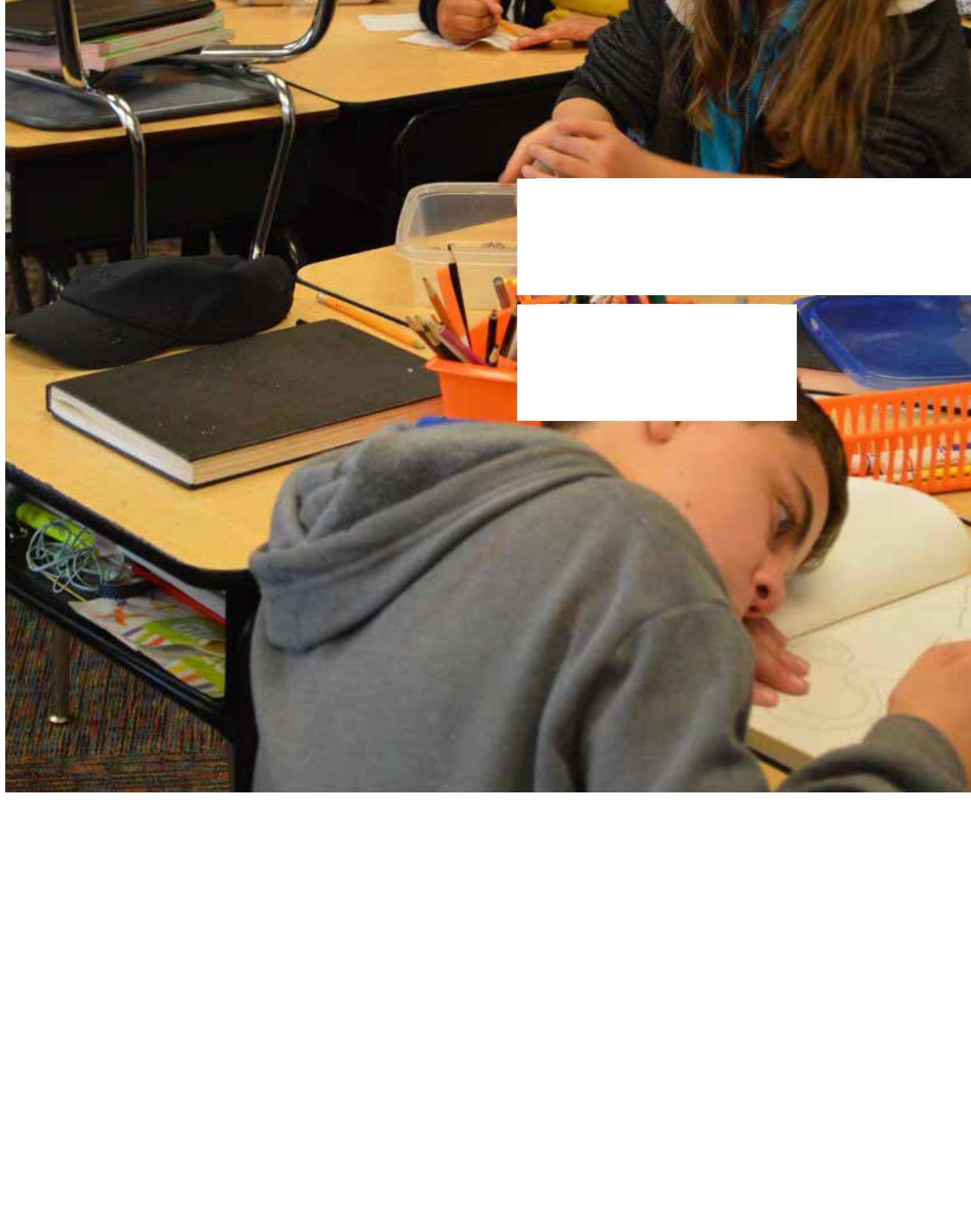
Still well within the forest, students re-enter district property.



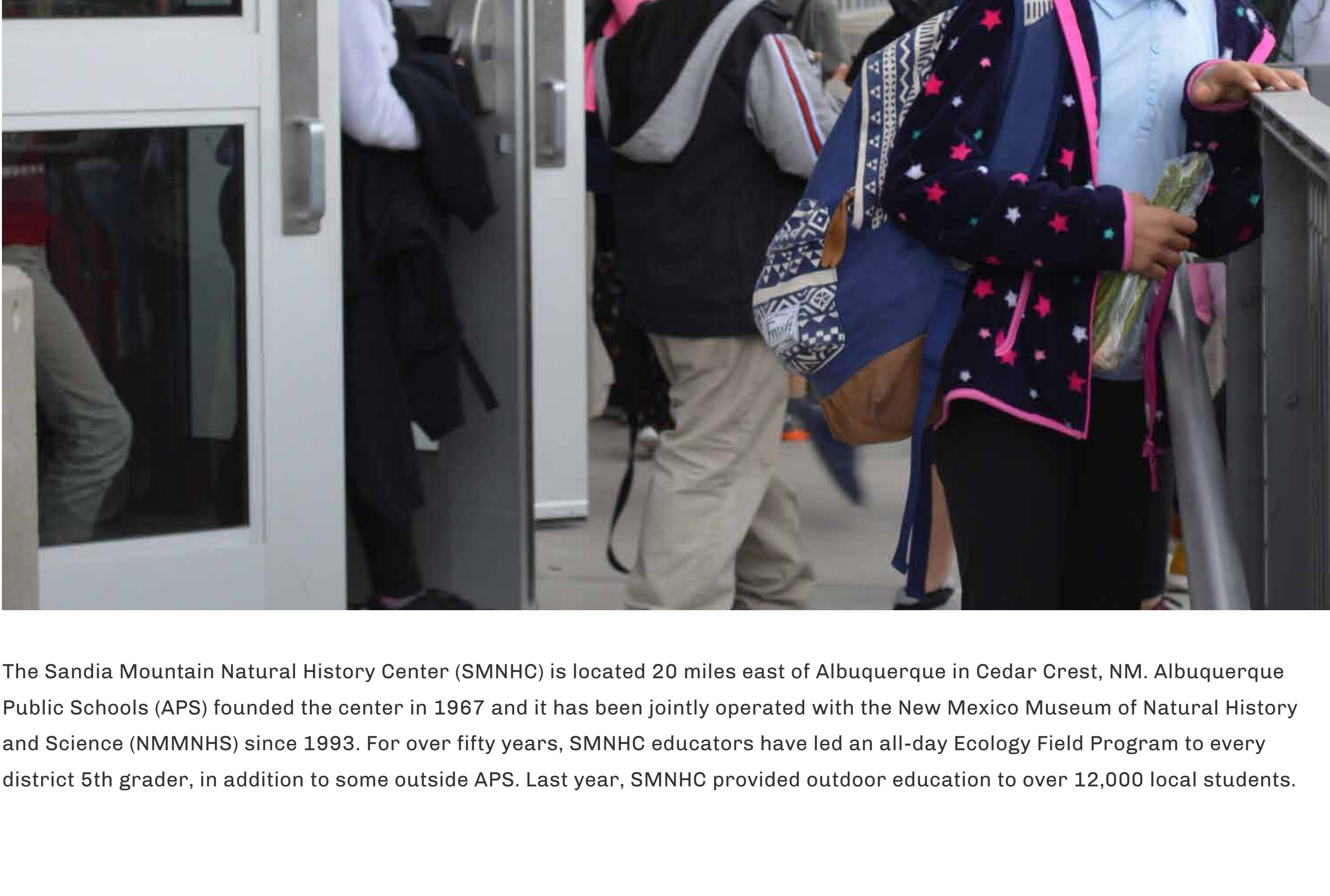
Chaperones play an important role while on the trail with their children.



This outdoor education hinges upon the financial support of APS' Student Transportation Services. Scheduling begins each spring to correspond with deliveries of life science kits to fifth-grade teachers from the district's Science Distribution Center. SMNHC district staff create the master schedule and send out registration forms for school liaisons to confirm enrollment and accommodations.



Their teacher provides quiet time for drawing and reflection.



The Sandia Mountain Natural History Center (SMNHC) is located 20 miles east of Albuquerque in Cedar Crest, NM. Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) founded the center in 1967 and it has been jointly operated with the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science (NMMNHS) since 1993. For over fifty years, SMNHC educators have led an all-day Ecology Field Program to every district 5th grader, in addition to some outside APS. Last year, SMNHC provided outdoor education to over 12,000 local students.

The authors would like to thank Dolores Gonzales Elementary students, teacher, principal and parents for allowing us to document their day in the field.

Works Cited

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