



25th Anniversary Article Series: Ah Spring on the McKenzie! *Article Contributed by Caryn Coss*
Ah spring on the McKenzie! Wildflowers are blooming, the sky is blue, newts and frogs are searching for mates, hawks and eagles are soaring, and schoolchildren are out enjoying it all. Well not yet but soon. The SFC Education Program has been interrupted by COVID like everything else. It's given me a chance to reflect on the many years that the program has served the children of Fresno and Madera Counties.

Jeannette Tuitele-Lewis started the field trip program back before she was SFC's Executive Director. The concept was simple: invite teachers to bring their classes to the preserve to learn about flora and fauna in the foothills. I signed up immediately and received the training that was available back then. Thank you, Craig Poole for teaching me about geology and Rodney Olsen for teaching about the critters that inhabit the McKenzie! There weren't many field trips the first couple years and I volunteered every chance my job would allow. I loved it!

At first the program was loosely organized with stations set up as we went along. We docents explained the things we saw as we walked along sharing our love of nature as best we could. Many memorable events occurred. Once, another docent and I were trapped at the picnic area by a thunderstorm with a group of kindergarteners. Children dove under the tables, adults got soaked even under the shelter of tall blue oaks. Lightning flashed around. Yikes! "This probably isn't a good idea," we agreed. We finally double-timed it back to the parking area. The kids loved it!

Another time third graders were exploring the creek looking for frogs, newts and other water loving critters. I'd sternly warned them that the granite boulders were slippery. I promptly demonstrated by inadvertently sitting in the creek. The kids loved it!

When Rosanna Ruiz became SFC's Director of Education and Outreach, she brought her expertise, superb organizational skills and sense of fun to the program. We had stations for binoculars (a pair for each kid), bug boxes, hand lenses, pre-collected acorns, rocks, wildflowers, feathers; even live newts that were collected each morning and released to their home at the end of the trip. Docents led the students from station to station and did our best to channel our inner teacher to use the materials. We stopped at each well-stocked station. Eventually movement was guided by walkie-talkie. The kids loved it!

All of this takes money. Donations sometimes couldn't keep up and the field trips were endangered. Grants don't last forever, busses and equipment are expensive; yet wonderful folks like Rosanna, several interns, and superbly dedicated docents like Florence Maly, Dennis Christiansen, Joni Bunnell and numerous others managed to help expand the program. Funding from generous donors helps immensely and are critical to be able to continue this work. I encourage all reading this article to donate to the good work of SFC to help ensure that this good work can continue.

I missed a season due to a car accident that left me wheelchair bound. SFC graciously allowed me to teach geology (thanks Craig). I would do anything to be out on the McKenzie in spring. By that time, the program had grown enough so that there were lots of new and experienced docents leading groups and a few of us with mobility issues could be accommodated. I loved it!

Most of the children who come on these trips have never been in spaces larger than a city park. They are just as fascinated by a cow or a stink bug as they are by a newt or a golden eagle. Climbing a boulder or running across a field is as novel as learning to use a pair of binoculars or a hand lens. The owl's feather disappears against the bark of a blue oak. Animal tracks can tell a story thanks to vinyl footprints. They learn that both basalt cliffs and granite boulders started out as "hot lava." Even geology can be fun. The kids love it!

When Rosanna left to pursue her doctorate, Allyson Brooks took over. Under Allyson's guidance, training for docents has been wonderfully refined and expanded and docent numbers keep growing. Two trips a week are ably handled by the many new volunteers she has recruited while most "old hands" have continued to share the McKenzie. Allyson's background in education, her local knowledge and infectious personality have ensured that the education program will continue to thrive despite the COVID hiatus.

Support SFC by joining the 25th Anniversary fundraiser and come join us as a docent for education and/or hiking, become a donor or boost your current donation. Do them all if you'd like! The kids and SFC will love it! You'll love it too!