



Takes Explorers Beyond Backyards with New Nature Project

Arizona 4-H is inviting kids and adults to connect with the outdoors right outside their own back doors through a brand new project called Backyards & Beyond. Concerned about an increasing disconnect between youth and the natural world, Arizona 4-H Director Kirk Astroth raised the alarm with 4-H national headquarters about the need to address what one author has called “nature-deficit disorder.” In response, USDA awarded Arizona 4-H a three-year grant to develop a curriculum to get kids, families, and neighborhoods exploring the outdoors and working together to reclaim neighborhood green spaces. Astroth recruited Suzanne Dhruv, co-director of the Ironwood Tree Experience, a program of Prescott College in Tucson, to create a curriculum to engage youth and families in exploring the natural environment around them.

Project activities like “Sensory Safari” challenge explorers to go outside and experience the shapes, sounds, textures, scents and even flavors found in nature near their homes. In an activity called “Seasons’ Greetings,” explorers practice a science called phenology, which focuses on observing seasonal changes. There are also activities that encourage explorers to take part in active play outdoors, to use their creativity in nature, and to observe wildlife and natural resources. But the project is more than just playing outside, said Dhruv. Building on the sense of place that develops from knowing and loving your environment, Backyards & Beyond also leads kids to make a personal commitment to the environment.

The project’s activities in environmental education, sustainability practices, natural resource conservation, citizen science, community development and environmental action can lead older teens to real-life opportunities like volunteering, internships, secondary education and even jobs that involve the outdoors, she said. One activity where she’s really seen kids thrive is the Environmental Action Plan, said Dhruv. “I feel very confident that kids are able to make a plan and follow through with positive action that improves their local environment,” she said, “They just need opportunities.”

With help from volunteer nature club leaders, such opportunities may soon be popping up all over. Anyone can start a Neighborhood Nature Club, even if they aren’t already involved in 4-H. A step-by-step guide called the Backyards and Beyond Neighborhood Nature Club Community Organization Guide and Tool Kit tells how. Neighborhood Nature Clubs bring together neighbors to share their love of the outdoors and invite young people to explore natural spaces and open places.

Astroth and Dhruv had help from 4-H National Headquarters, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, USA-National Phenology Network, Children & Nature Network, and individuals who helped create and review the curriculum. “It’s all about making it easy and fun for people to get into the outdoors,” said Astroth. “A lifetime connection to the natural world can start right in your own backyard.”

To learn more about the curriculum, go to:
neighborhoodnatureclubs.arizona.edu

