



Working and Learning Among California Oaks

B. Tietje, B. Gingg, J. Zingo, and L. Huntsinger

University of California, Berkeley, California USA (wdtietje@nature.berkeley.edu, bgingg@smcf.org, jzingo@co.slo.ca.us, Huntsinger@calmail.berkeley.edu)

With tremendous support from collaborators and enthusiastic volunteers, “Learning Among the Oaks” at the historic Santa Margarita Ranch has become a favorite outdoor learning experience for hundreds of Santa Margarita School students, along with their teachers and families. Oaks are at the center of this unique and cost effective public education program. From getting to know local oaks to exploring conservation issues within the context of a historic working cattle ranch, students take pride in expanding their awareness and knowledge of the local oak woodland community.

Santa Margarita School families representing the varied demographics of the community come together on the trail. For many, the program provides a first opportunity to get to know those who make a living on the land and to understand that this land around their school is more than a pretty view. “Learning Among the Oaks” also addresses the need for quality, hands-on science activities and opportunities to connect children with the outdoor world. Using a thematic approach and correlating lessons with State Science Standards, we’ve engaged students in a full-spectrum of exciting outdoor learning adventures. As students progress through the grades, they find new challenges within the oak trail environment.

We’ve succeeded in establishing an internship program that brings highly qualified, enthusiastic university students out to practice their science teaching skills while working with elementary school students. In the future, these university student interns may assist with the development of interpretive displays, after-school nature activities and monitoring projects. We’ve benefited from proximity to Cal Poly State University and its “learn-by-doing” philosophy. We’ve also succeeded in building a dedicated network of volunteers and collaborators, each with a special interest satisfied through participation in the oak trail program.

While “Learning Among the Oaks” has focused on educating school children and their families, “Working Among the Oaks” has focused on connecting with the agricultural and environmental communities. For example, the Ranching Sustainability Self-Assessment Program is an ambitious, long-range project with tremendous potential to aid private landowners throughout California in implementing sustainable ranching practices. We’ve made great progress through the efforts of an impressive committee of local private landowners, ranch managers and resource professionals. They believe that this can be a powerful non-regulatory tool to guide private landowners through everyday decision-making processes. Most importantly, this is a tool that could be adapted for use throughout California oak woodland. The Self Assessment Program, along with the supporting Workshops, have stimulated discussion and interest in sustainable ranching among people with diverse experiences and backgrounds.

“Learning and Working Among the Oaks” together reach the full spectrum of oak conservation stakeholders, from kids to grandparents, town residents to ranching families, environmental groups to farm and vineyard managers, and more. The diversity of these stakeholders helps us identify collaborative education and research opportunities to support education and management of the 3 million ha of California oak woodlands.