



Nature Fun Area at the Kids First Fair, MCB Camp Pendleton

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Project Summary

The "Nature Fun Area" brought "nature" for the first time to the 17th annual Kids First Fair, on Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton. Seventeen local nature providers and organizations came together to provide hands-on nature experiences for children and their families, as well as information about programs, camps, and other opportunities to get out in local nature. Experiences ranged from live wildlife encounters to building forts to planting seeds and beyond! The event was sponsored by Marine Corps Community Services and more than 5,000 attended. The San Diego Children and Nature Collaborative (SDCaN) partnered with the Sierra Club (both National and Local), the San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research, Family Adventures in Nature, and Mission Trails Regional Park to deliver this successful event.



Background

When families spend time in nature, they slow down, interact with each other, experience the wonder of nature together, and foster lifelong connections to the natural world. Children are happier, healthier and smarter when they learn in nature and play outdoors—whether it is in their schoolyard, nearby open space, wilderness, or backyard. Kids develop motor skills and fitness, follow their curiosity and creativity, get a sense of place, and gain special memories of nature that carry throughout their lives.

Yet most families are unaware that nature is in our backyards and in our neighborhoods—and that these places are accessible, affordable and just as special as Yosemite National Park. Many families lack knowledge of local places to go, suggested activities with children in nature, precautions relating to health and safety, and confidence to organize a family outing. This may be particularly true of military families, who typically have high rates of transiency and therefore limited knowledge about their nearby nature opportunities.

The Sierra Club's Military Family and Veterans Initiative (MFVI), formerly Military Families Outdoors (MFO) is a part of Mission Outdoors, the Sierra Club's campaign to ensure that America gets outside! MFVI helps American military service members, veterans, and their families use the land they defended. The Sierra Club works to increase opportunities for military personnel and/or their families to have quality outdoor experience, and engage public officials about the challenges military personnel and their families face as well as the healthful benefits of the natural world.

The Nature Fun Area at the Kids First Fair on MCB Camp Pendleton, was mutually beneficial to both participants and exhibitors alike. In many cases it was the first exposure to local nature organizations and opened the door for future experiences. Likewise, relationships among military personnel, military organizations, the exhibitors and the San Diego Children and Nature Collaborative team were established and will be built upon in the coming months and into the future.



Methods

The San Diego Children and Nature Collaborative secured a \$5000 grant from the Sierra Club Military Families Outdoors program. Some in-kind contributions were solicited from local businesses. Janice Swaisgood served as project coordinator.

The following goals were set for the project:

1. Introduce military families to local opportunities for nature and outdoor experiences
2. Introduce military organizations to local nature and outdoor organizations, and vice versa
3. Organize nature-based activities for children and families at event
4. Connect people with local natural history and biodiversity, and the special outdoor places in San Diego

In order to meet and/or exceed these goals, the team took many steps to ensure that relationships were formed, introductions made, and that military families would have ample opportunity to learn about and connect with local nature providers.

Seventeen organizations participated in the Fair, each providing a hands-on, nature-based activity for the day, as well as information about their organization and nature-based programs.

Participating exhibitors included:

- Birch Aquarium • www.aquarium.ucsd.edu
- Buena Vista Audubon • www.bvaudubon.org
- Camp Pendleton Game Wardens
- City of Escondido, Parks & Recreation • www.escondido.org/parks-lakes-trails.aspx
- City of Oceanside Parks & Recreation • www.ci.oceanside.ca.us/gov/ns/parks.asp
- Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve • www.olivenhain.com/index.php/about-us/elfin...
- Family Adventures in Nature • www.familyadventuresinnature.org
- Lakeshore Learning • www.lakeshorelearning.com
- Project Wildlife • www.projectwildlife.org
- San Diego Botanic Garden • www.sdbgarden.org
- San Diego Natural History Museum • www.sdnhm.org
- San Diego Sierra Club • www.sandiego.sierraclub.org
- San Diego Zoo (including Dr. Zoolittle) • www.sandiegozoo.org
- San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research • www.sandiegozooqlobal.org/icr
- Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve • www.torreypine.org
- US Fish & Wildlife Service • www.fws.gov

In order to facilitate visitations to and participation in the various exhibits, a “BINGO” card was developed and distributed amongst participants. The San Diego Sierra Club donated the copying of the card. Any child that wanted a BINGO card got one, then as they completed activities at the various exhibits, they received a stamp on their card. Children received prizes based on the number of stamps they received: 3 stamps = a pencil; 6 stamps = a magnifying glass; 9 stamps = a choice of prizes (ranging from t-shirts to stuffed animals and more).

Another key strategy for the day involved the making of and dissemination of a “North County Nature Guide”. The guides were made available at various tables throughout the Nature Fun

Area. Additionally, Janice made personal contact with people as they walked around the area, made sure they got a guide and made a brief “pitch” on the importance of kids having unstructured time to play and learn in nature, including sharing that both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Center for Disease Control both formally recommend 60 minutes per day of unstructured time to play outdoors.

Results

The “Nature Fun Area” of the Kids First Fair on MCB Camp Pendleton was well-attended and well-received, by organizations and participants alike. Over 5,000 attended the Fair overall, with approximately a third to a half of those passing through the Nature Fun Area. Adults and children alike were observed to be engaged and having fun with the various activities. Families were receptive and appreciative, “we just moved here and we didn’t know where to go to enjoy the outdoors.”

Nature activities were some of the most interesting and interesting at the fair. Kids and adults alike had fun—touching snakes, dissecting owl pellets, meeting animal ambassadors, planting seeds, seeing “stuffed” animals, identifying scat, making tracks, trying out surf boards and kayaks, and so much more. They built tepees and forts from natural materials (bamboo, sticks, pine cones, shells, tree cookies) and boxes, sheets, twine, and clothes pins—this is officially called “Loose Parts Nature Play!”

A post-event survey was conducted with participating organizations. The results of the survey were overwhelmingly positive, with 100% of those who filled out the survey “extremely satisfied” with the Nature Fun Area of the Kids First Fair. Nine of the 11 who filled out the survey said that it would be “extremely likely” for them to collaborate with the San Diego Children and Nature Collaborative again on another project, with 9 also saying that they’d like to work together on a similar event for military families planned for October 13, 2012 at Mission Trails Regional Park.

Other comments from the survey included:

- Great turnout. Having the booth waiting for us made the event easier to manage.
- Very well organized with courteous staff. Very helpful.
- I like the idea of grouping the nature displays in one stand-alone area...I was able to meet several other naturalists and got some ideas on how to improve our display..
- Make activities easier to reach by younger-shorter children, perhaps child-sized tables or plastic step stools.
- Provide more orientation to volunteers before the event.
- Notify exhibitors of military customs including “colors” means coming to attention, removing hats and silence.
- Janice was exceptional! Without her help, we probably would not have made it to the expo.
- Nice to support military families and kids whose parents are on deployment.
- Thanks for the invitation. We had a great time and hope we made nature more interesting.

The following expenditures were covered by the \$5000 grant from the Sierra Club:

- \$2,200 for project coordinator Janice Swaisgood

- \$300 for prizes and other supplies
- \$2000 for event participation fee, paid to MCCC
- \$500 for administrative costs to the San Diego Audubon Society (which serves as the fiscal sponsor for SDCaN)

The following donations were received:

- Adventure 16 donated 250 magnifying lenses and provided another 150 at cost
- ICF-Jones and Stokes (consulting firm) printed the North County Nature Guide
- Carlsbad Art Fam donated one week of day camp (for the raffle)
- Lakeshore
- San Diego Zoo donated about 100 t-shirts
- Sierra Club's Military Family and Veterans Initiative donated about 80 t-shirts
- San Diego Botanic Garden donated passes for 2 families (for the raffle)
- San Diego Safari provided Animal Show and donated passes for 2 families (for the raffle)

A post-event planning meeting was held on May 10, 2012 and the following were identified as successful elements:

- Set-up was excellent and greatly appreciated (canopy, 2 tables, 2 chairs), good location on the grass. Perhaps two tables wide or larger exhibit space, for the number of children and families.
- Nature guide is a great resource, and can now be posted online and be incorporated into materials prepared for military families
- Loose Parts Nature Play activity worked to engage children and invite parents to help. Bingo card (for 9 activities) were completed by 315 children (out of 1000 printed).
- The BINGO card was well-received with over 320 being turned in, most with all nine stamps. Some participated in the activities but did not get their cards stamped or turn in their card.
- This event resulted in visibility and introductions to military family service organizations, and demonstrated that families are interested in nature activities with their children.

The following elements could be improved at the next event:

- Raffle wasn't successful, hard to hand out tickets, no one could hear and many had already left when the raffle occurred.
- Ran out of magnifying glasses and t-shirts.
- Ask to get \$2000 fee reduced or waived, perhaps we could be a participant instead of paying sponsor.
- Add chairs for parents to observe and allow the children to play with Loose Parts Nature Play. Tear down the tepees-forts so new ones could be built.
- Really need to seek sponsors for subsequent events and programs. Without extra funding, event t-shirts were not made (which would be ongoing "advertising" for the event or military family nature activities).



Conclusions

The military community is just that – a community. Like all people, the military community will benefit from time spent in nature and for a variety of reasons, many are left not knowing about the value of nature, nor knowing where to go in their local areas. Transiency rates are high among military families, which only heightens these issues. Likewise, local nature providers also benefit from military families knowing about and visiting their locations. Simply put, connecting military families to nearby nature places and local organizations is a win-win situation for all involved.

As the San Diego Children and Nature Collaborative partnered with key organizations such as the Sierra Club, and added value to the Kids First Fair sponsored by Marine Corps Community Services, positive exposure was gained with both participants and exhibitors. Relationships were born that will be cultivated over time, strengthening and becoming even more mutually beneficial. The San Diego Children and Nature Collaborative now has its “foot in the door” with many individuals and programs in the military community.

During the planning and at the event, we met a number of MCCA and other military organizations, and will work to introduce them to local environmental and outdoor organizations and places. We hope that invitations to family-centered nature activities can be extended through military organizations; that more schools, YMCA and after-school programs can schedule nature-based activities for children from military families; that organizations can recruit military youth into local outdoor and camp programs; that information about local nature places and programs can be included in military family information packets; and more.

Next steps for building upon these relationships will be to host another “Military Family Nature Day” on October 13, 2012, at Mission Trails Regional Park. Plans are underway to have an equally successful event that and connect and strengthen relationships between military organizations and local nature providers, as well as between military families and nature.

Planning Team

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