Lessons in Environmental Education
With John Sanders

BY MICHAEL KAUFFMANN

Nature awareness is a deeply personal experience that engages all the senses. Children need time to explore, touch, smell, taste, and hear.

Naturalist and educator John Sanders spent much of his time as a young child exploring the boundaries of Lake Erie, Pennsylvania where he was born. He spent his summers roaming the boat docks and marinas around the lake, foraging for crappie, blue gill, and perch, using wood-stick fishing poles armed with safety pin hooks.

Nature has always figured prominently in John’s life and that of his family’s. His mother grew up on a forty-acre farm in rural Mississippi, where her family either grew or hunted for most of their food. Their awareness, connection, and appreciation for nature was based on necessity. The Earth gave, either through cultivation or serendipity, and they lived within its cyclical offerings and boundaries.

In 1956, John and his family relocated to California. Venice Beach and the Santa Monica Pier became his new playgrounds, because his father worked as a commercial fisherman. He quickly developed a relationship with the marine world. Although John had experienced the red tides due to *Pseudo nitzschia* blooms, it wasn’t until he began studying marine science in college that he developed an understanding of the connection between red algal blooms, summer shellfish, bait fish toxicity, and the subsequent domino effect on marine mammals, like sea lions and sea otters.

While working towards a Master’s in Marine Biology at UC Santa Cruz, John began his journey as an environmental educator. As a grad student, John helped develop the UC Santa Cruz Summer Science Program, which exposed young students to the possibility of careers in science and jumpstarted the development of students’ science identities. He focused his outreach on kids who were considered to be underachievers – the

John’s strategies for teaching students about native plants

Outdoor exploration is the key to converting students from casual observers into naturalists. Regional natural history (place-based education) is also crucial so that children come to know and appreciate the local ecosystems where they live, connecting to the cycles around them, says John.

He recommends having kids keep a journal to draw and describe what they see, creating their own field guide to their “neighborhood.” John encourages kids to use their senses when exploring. For example, the word aromatic takes on real meaning after inhaling the scent of different *Salvia* species. Sticky monkey flower (*Mimulus auranticus*) has an unforgettable sticky sensation, and the common name makes sense to kids. Once they’ve felt the leaves and seen the “face” of the monkey formed by the petals, they know that plant, he says.

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Environmental educator John Sanders and CNPS San Luis Obispo Chapter member. (Photo: Rick Halsey)
ones most overlooked in class because they often
don’t attract attention.

Since 2001 John has been a Naturalist with the Kern
Environmental Education Program (KEEP). KEEP is a
residential outdoor school where fifth and sixth grade
students from Kern County travel to the coast and
explore it – like a living laboratory – with naturalists
like John. In 2011, he founded Delphinus School of
Natural History, a regional outdoor science program
in San Luis Obispo. Through Delphinus, John has been
working with local kids to help them develop regional
nature awareness, while guiding them along the path
of becoming environmental stewards. This also allows
John to be outside working with kids in the summer.

Some wonder why John can’t take a break, but he
says for him there is no other way.

“Virtually every student has at least one memorable experience in the outdoors that
can be used as a springboard.

John Suggests – Species Discovery!
Encourage kids to explore on their own and make
their own discoveries. Challenge them to find a
particularly interesting plant, describe it, and give
it their own name!