A day in the life of an Environmental Education intern

“Cock a doodle doo!”

There’s Tito, our brave rooster, reminding us all it’s time to get up. I rise and stumble to the kitchen. I cook breakfast, fresh eggs mingled in the cast iron with tomatoes and basil from our garden.

In the office, I watch as our wonderful volunteers trickle in, each with a smile on their face and a story ready to pour from their lips. The kettle hums, cups are filled, stories settle and the meeting begins. We learn about how old our kids are today, and how long we get to take them into the woods.

The yellow bus pulls in, a stream of excited third graders pours out. We call them into a circle; they give us something that could only be described as a kidney bean. A song is shared, daily challenges announced, all of us thrilled to begin our adventure.

The class is divided, my group swarms towards me. We each pick ‘nature names’. A blonde in pigtails chooses to be called ‘Butterfly’, the smallest of the group dubs himself ‘Stick’. The rest of the names are chosen and we head into the garden.

Stick leads my crew through our first tunnel. We learn about the six plant parts, exploring the garden to collect each of these parts for our morning snack, crawling through tunnels and giving a scarecrow a high-five. As we eat, a chorus of ‘mmhhmmm...’ passes through the circle.

Scraps are collected, piled together to form a worm burrito. Raccoon tosses it into the heaping compost pile. Exclamations of “icky!” leap from the mouths of the kids as we discover how our burrito is turned into dirt. Now it’s time to give our sheep a visit.

We clamber inside the pen, hands diving deep into the wool of the sheep. Moving into the cow pen, we give Cleo the Jersey cow a back rub. I point to her udders and we discuss the best of all dairy products, ice cream. Next we feed chickens and receive some pig kisses from the beautiful sow Scarlet. Then, after insisting to our goats that nametags are not food, we say our farewells to the animals and head off to the forest.

We eat lunch by the creek, though the kids can hardly sit still long enough to chew. The last bite is swallowed; shoes are removed and pant legs rolled up. Laughter and squeals fill the air. Half my group has decorated their faces with face paint made from rocks, the other half scans the creek side, determined to find a banana slug. “I found one!!!” shrieks Butterfly. I gently pick up our new friend, and each child takes turn joining the banana slug kissing club. As shoes are put back on cold feet, I return our new friend to his home and we continue our hike.

It’s a slow journey up the hill, each turn of the trail revealing another discovery. We hear coyote howls coming from below, our other friends are nearby. We howl back, then wait
excitedly in silence for a reply. “Oowww….” Our classmates seem to be moving up stream. We move past shadowed madrones and into sunshine and sage. Upon reaching the top we let out a victorious howl. Then run down the hill giggling.

We rejoin fellow classmates, another kidney bean is formed. Stories of the day are shared, challenges met. One last round of hugs and then the kids filter back onto the waiting bus. The guides regroup too, sharing tales and lessons learned along their journey that day.

Time has flown and suddenly it’s time for chores. I’m welcomed by the low hungry moos of Cleo and Maisy. I toss in some alfalfa and call in Cleo, though it is Maisy who shows up. After five minutes of discussion, I milk Maisy first, Cleo waiting patiently at the door for her turn. Their udders now empty I send the girls out to finish their meal.

Soon I hear the cowbell ring reminding us all it’s time to eat. The kitchen is busy with laughter from my roommates and delicious smells bubbling from pots. Dinner is served. A moment’s lull as people savor each bite. But as the plates grow empty, the stories and laughter pick back up.

A glance at the clock reminds me it’s time for bed. I lay my head down on my pillow, and am lulled to sleep by the sweet chirp of frogs.

- An Environmental Education Intern, 2010-2011