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WITH THE KIDS

A hobby that rocks

Those who collect stones dig -- and create -- local treasures.

By Brenda Rees, Special to The Times

Emma Mayer's two young sons recently traded in their Pokémon cards for a new collection that's stashed in egg cartons, pushpin containers and assorted boxes scattered around the house. "They just love collecting rocks," says Mayer, who lives in Ventura. "They like being outdoors, getting really dirty and coming home with 'cool stuff.' "

In Southern California, rock hunting can be a family hobby that is cheap, fun and educational. Local beaches, mountains and especially deserts are prime locales for rocks, minerals and the occasional fossil.

Materials are simple: a good shovel and bucket -- maybe a pick hammer, map or guidebook. Probably the biggest expense for rock hunting is gasoline for getting to and from remote destinations.

"Southern California is quite a good area for gemstones, especially in San Diego County," says Tony Kampf, curator of mineral sciences at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. "I recommend that the best way to find these places is for people to join a rock club, since there are so many limitations and restrictions on where you can go nowadays."

Overall, says Kampf, there are two types of rock collectors: "those who self-collect and those that find specimens at [rock] shows. Most collectors, however, are a little bit of both."

Rock collecting seems to be instinctive for kids. As long as she can remember, 14-year-old Cathy O'Campo has been picking up rocks. "Whenever my mom and dad took me places, I would always bring home rocks," says the Anaheim resident.

O'Campo recently joined the Searchers Gem and Mineral Society and attends monthly field trips, accompanied by her parents. "It's fun to go to new places and look for rocks," she says. "Our last trip was at Clear Creek [near Coalinga], and I was looking for serpentine, jade and black-green garnet."

At weekly club meetings, O'Campo gets the opportunity to transform her rock and gem findings into jewelry. She's learning wire wrapping, polishing and even the art of the silversmith from a 92-year-old member.

"I also write a column in our monthly newsletter," she adds. "This time, I'm writing about birthstones."

The club offers other Rocking Kid activities, such as visits to local museums, archeological sites and additional field trips to view private collections. At the Ventura Gem and Mineral Club, Mayer organizes children's weekly meetings for the Pebble Pups. Adult members usually bring in samples of their collections and talk about different aspects of the hobby.

"We also have a hands-on activity with the kids," adds Mayer. "It's fun to see adults sharing their hobby with the little ones."