



Thursday, May 31, 2001

FAMILY

It Squirms, It's Goopy, It's Life

The 12th Kids' Nature Festival will give kids 8 and younger a close look at the natural world.

By BRENDA REES, Special To The Times

Move over big brother and sister: Here's an event for crawlers, toddlers and droolers.

The 12th annual Kids' Nature Festival, held Saturday at Temescal Gateway Park in Pacific Palisades, is filled with outdoorsy, hands-on activities geared specifically toward infants to 8-year-olds. Think of it as a festival for the sandbox generation.

Toddlers can dig for dinosaurs, crawl through a mole tunnel, pat friendly reptiles and join in a sing-along concert. Exhibits are positioned at kid-level and youngsters will have many opportunities to touch, splash and even get a little messy.

Sponsored by the Children's Nature Institute (CNI), the festival is a way the organization encourages parents to expose their children--especially the very young--to the wonders of the great outdoors.

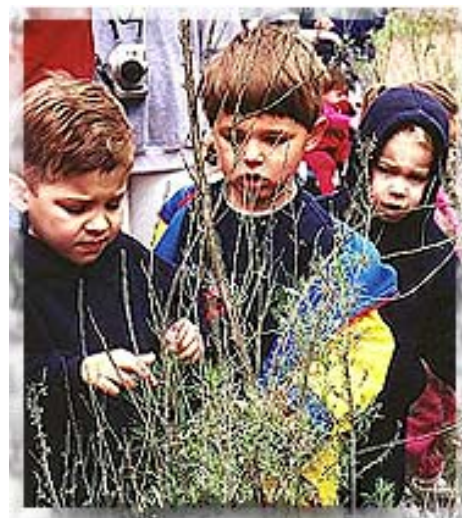
"This is our major fund-raiser," explains Lizette Castano of CNI. "This event helps us with the programs we do throughout the year--like our Outreach Discovery program, where we take at-risk and disadvantaged kids and get them out in nature."

The Outreach Discovery program, established in 1992, provides free nature field trips and transportation for more than 100 inner-city schools, shelters, teen parents and their children and other organizations serving youngsters with special needs.

In addition, CNI offers regularly scheduled walks around the Los Angeles area where adults and children can explore nature with a friendly guide. The walks are free--there is a suggested \$7-per-family donation--and they often introduce parents to locations they might have overlooked when single.

"Nature is just something I never did before," says mom Vicki Kirschenbaum of Burbank. "I never camped or anything like that, but coming on these walks makes me feel more comfortable around nature. I think we might even plan a camping trip when my daughter Molly is older."

Kirschenbaum explains that she started coming on the walks three years ago because Molly needed to be around other adults--something new moms, who tend to spend too much time at home alone, need to do. "The walks are always in safe environments and I have learned about some great places to go," she says. "One of Molly and my favorite places to visit is Franklin Canyon. We went there first on a



Curious youngsters beat the bushes at an outing sponsored by the Children's Nature Institute.

Photos courtesy of Children's Nature Institute

walk."

Nature walks are held at county parks, beaches, canyons and marshes, and stretch from Topanga to Torrance, Valencia to Redondo Beach. Most walks are "stroller-friendly" so parents can bring young babies for a breath of fresh air. Toddlers, however, seem to prefer ambling down the trail on their own, stopping here and there to check out the rocks, leaves and bugs. Adults shouldn't expect a fast-paced workout when they come on a walk, but rather a leisurely stroll that gives them time to remember the excitement of seeing nature up-close and personal.

Held in the mornings during the week and weekends, each nature walk has its own unique personality, depending on the guide and the location. Some guides sing during their walk while others focus on making crafts, using puppets or reading stories. Some guides simply walk and encourage the group to listen to the sounds of nature. But all guides want adults and kids to come away from the walk with a sensory experience of nature.

On a recent nature walk at Eaton Canyon in Pasadena, Kirschenbaum and Molly touched tree bark, explored the insides of a wild cucumber, sang a song with a skunk puppet and gently cupped a handful of squirmy tadpoles.

Their guide, Susan Garcia, has been a volunteer walk leader for more than 10 years. "Sometimes we just stand and quietly listen to the wind," Garcia says. "We encourage the five senses when we go on walks."

Garcia says that volunteer guides go through a "basic training" at each walk location in which they learn about the unique natural elements there. CNI guides have varied day jobs--such as accountants, firemen, journalists, nurses and entertainment executives--but Garcia contends that educated training isn't that important when leading family walks.

"I have come to realize that it's up to the kids to help shape that specific walk," she explains. "We are just there to gently move them along the way."

Garcia adds that the walk turnouts can be big or little. She's had huge crowds at some of her walks as well as intimate walks with only one family. "As long as someone shows up, I am out there doing the walk," she says.

A former office manager, Garcia says she has always had a love of nature and traces that back to her childhood home in Arizona. "I had a wonderful aunt who took me on hikes. She taught me how to drink water out of a creek using my hands. We'd find rocks, bring them home and paint them to be turtles," she says. "It was always magical to be around her."

"Leading these nature walks is my way of giving that magic back," Garcia says.

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Kids' Nature Festival, Saturday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Temescal Gateway Park, 15601 Sunset Boulevard, Pacific Palisades. Adults \$7, children 12 months to 12 years old \$5. For more information, call (310) 364-3591.

To receive a copy of upcoming family nature walks organized by the Children's Nature Institute, call (310) 364-3591 or visit the Web site at www.childrensnatureinstitute.org. Reservations are highly recommended. There is a suggested donation of \$7 per family per walk.



A child gets her face painted at the institute's annual festival.

