

Planting Trees With Local Kids

A Celebration of Earth Day

by Jen Nissenbaum

“Thanks for letting us come with you to help plant trees and learn about nature” reads one of the colorfully decorated cards from Lee Vining 5th and 6th graders. These students, along with the 3rd and 4th graders, joined Mono Lake Committee staff on a field trip in celebration of Earth Day, planting cottonwood cuttings along Rush Creek and learning about the importance of riparian habitat.

Tree Planting Preparation

Prior to the field trip, the Committee’s Assistant Education Director Santiago Escruceria and I visited the students in their classroom—engaging the kids in a discussion about the history of water diversions at Rush Creek and providing a hands-on opportunity to learn about water quality through a science experiment. By the end of the classroom visit, the kids began to understand how a healthy riparian ecosystem is linked to water quality, started to get excited about plantint grees in their local watershed.

Prior to the cottonwoods bemerging from dormancy in spring, Committee staff collected cuttings from mature cottonwoods in Lee Vining Canyon (and stored them in a refrigerator at the Mono Market for a month: Thanks Chris!). The week before the Earth Day field trip, we dug deep holes for the trees, so that when the students arrived at the creek, they simply had to find the holes, choose a cutting to plant, and secure the tree in the hole.

Tree Planting at Rush Creek

The trees were planted on April 21st (the day before Earth Day) below the Rush Creek culvert at Test Station Road. Prior to the planting there were no cottonwoods immediately downstream of the culvert—making this part of the streambed prone to erosion, especially during high flows.

In all, the classes planted over 40 Black Cottonwoods in three adjacent sites on Rush Creek’s west bank. This was the first time the Committee has planted cottonwood cuttings by hand, and it was difficult to plant the trees as



Jen Nissenbaum gives local students a hands-on lesson on the best way to plant cottonwood cuttings along the banks of Rush Creek.

deep as when the holes were dug with the assistance of a backhoe-mounted auger. Dave Martin, a stream restoration scientist with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power said to expect a survival rate of about 25%. Past cottonwood plantings in the Mono Basin have had survival rates ranging from 47%–84%.

In addition to tree planting, the local kids also participated in fun activities during the Earth Day field trip—like learning about local birds, putting their feet in cold water, and listening to the sounds of Rush Creek. One group even saw a small scorpion—an exciting find! The Lee Vining kids said that they are excited to check on their trees later in the year to see if they make it through peak flows in the early summer. They won’t be alone, as Committee staff plans on monitoring the survival and sprouting of these cottonwoods to

help in future tree planting efforts! ❖

Jen Nissenbaum was the Committee’s Policy Coordinator, and has recently moved on to new pursuits. In the meantime she’s been enjoying the high spring flows by river raft!



Santiago Escruceria leads fun activities with the students like this team-building exercise at Rush Creek.