

Topic:

Nature-based Activities & the Great Outdoors Offer Valuable Lessons

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Word count:

701 words

**Northwest Florida's Santa Rosa County
Doubles as an Outdoor Classroom for Students**

To a great degree, the phrase “Kids will be kids” simply doesn’t hold true in today’s society. Their lives filled with instant messages, year-round baseball, cell phones, demanding academics, and so much more, teenagers simply do not have time to disconnect so they can, well, reconnect with their inner child, with each other, and with nature.

Fortunately – for kids’ sake – there are some organizations that refuse to accept this new reality and are exploring ways for America’s youth to retreat from the chaos of every day life and learn about themselves and the great outdoors. This is the case for Adventures Unlimited and Eco-Beach, two tourist attractions in Northwest Florida’s Santa Rosa County that have created programs aimed at exposing students to nature-based, confidence-building activities.

Take Adventures Unlimited, for starters. This spring, the outdoor recreation center located in Milton, Florida, will host more than 100 students traveling nearly 700 miles from North Broward Preparatory School in North Lauderdale, Florida, for three days of canoeing, camping, and more.

During this time, students will learn lessons ranging from geology to orienteering (map and compass skills) to stewardship of the crystal clear rivers that surround them. They will also participate in a ropes course featuring low and high elements that teach teamwork, leadership, and problem solving while also building self-esteem. And, they’ll do it in the middle of 88 wooded acres free from the constraints of time and other demands of daily life.

“I wish every school-aged child could have the chance to experience nature firsthand,” said Suzi Roberts, Business Manager of Adventures Unlimited. “Learning about tributaries while you’re out on the river is so much better than reading about them in chapter three of a text book.”

While Adventures Unlimited cannot put every child in touch with nature, the organization does reach thousands of students each year, including football players, band members, and ROTC students. Furthermore, Adventures Unlimited is not alone in its efforts to use nature to positively impact the lives of children.

As Santa Rosa County, encompassing Navarre Beach, Blackwater River State Forest, and Historic Milton, moves toward sustainable, nature-based tourism, more and more people are sharing this mindset. Another great example is Eco-Beach, a family-oriented recreational rental shop on Navarre Beach.

Last year, the shop’s founder and owner Mike Martino, along with his wife Caryn, joined forces with a local marine biology teacher to initiate an informal kayaking program for local high school students. For months, before Hurricane Ivan hit, 15-20 students would show up at Eco-Beach’s doorstep bright and early every Saturday morning, grab a sea kayak, and head for the water.

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“They would come back exhausted...sometimes so tired they were practically falling over,” said Martino. “It was great. They got to enjoy nature and, at the same time, build their self-esteem...without spending a penny.”

Martino was amazed that the students showed up time and time again, not to mention at 7 a.m. on a weekend. “These kids were go-getters,” he said. “And, that’s what education is really all about...showing up, trying new things, and being persistent.”

Leaders at the Santa Rosa Tourist Development Council couldn’t agree more and are delighted that travel-related businesses within the community are taking an active role in educating children, especially about nature-based activities and the great outdoors.

“Nature is the heart of this region, and we are committed to protecting and enhancing our environment,” said Kathy Newby, Executive Director of the Santa Rosa County TDC. “Education plays a pivotal role in promoting sustainable tourism, and we are grateful for organizations that have assumed a leadership role and are taking steps in this direction. Their knowledge and, moreover, their passion, is contagious.”

Navarre Beach and its surrounding communities, offering solitude and simplicity, offer a haven for nature enthusiasts. The beach is home to Gulf Islands National Seashore and eight miles of federally preserved, undeveloped shoreline. To the North, tourists can enjoy hundreds of miles of canoe and hiking trails in a hidden region dubbed the “Canoe Capitol of Florida.” Santa Rosa County is also known for its rich heritage and interesting historical sites. What better place to double as an outdoor classroom for students and tourists alike.