

Los Angeles Times

Friday, August 24, 2007

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ON THE OUTDOORS

Youngsters get a taste of life in ocean

SAN DIEGO — With bulging eyes and giant webbed feet, the intrepid young divers press forth, delving deeper into a realm both mysterious and new.

A large school of smelt passes to their left. A bright orange garibaldi darts into the rocks. Tiny brown opaleye hold their ground, allowing for close encounters.

But it is a small invertebrate called a keyhole limpet, plucked from a submerged rock by the trip leader, that lures the kids into a circle.

There's nothing special about the animal itself: an odd-shaped, algae-grazing cousin of the snail. But there is a myth the leader associates with the limpet.

If it tastes sweet, she says, it means seven years of good luck. And if it's salty, then it's just another limpet.

Treading water in a far-flung corner of Mission Bay, the children pass this animal around, and those daring enough press its carrot-colored foot to the tips of their tongues.

Salty, the first taster declares. Mine too, says another. It's salty at one end but sweet at the other, proclaims another limpet connoisseur.

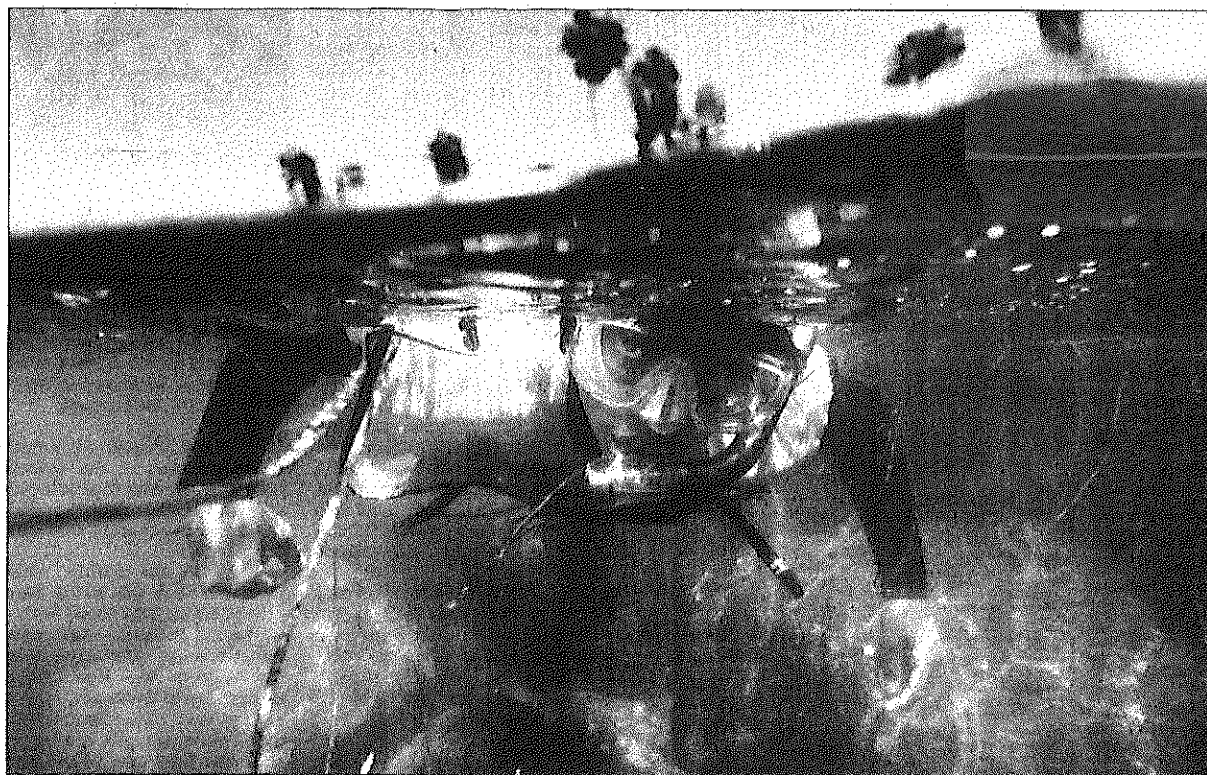
And so it goes for the eighth-graders from Monarch School in downtown San Diego. Honest appraisals, and hopes not easily raised.

Monarch School serves the at-risk and homeless. Students live on the streets, in shelters, motels or modest apartments — or some combination thereof.

This visit represents a glorious reprieve from classroom lectures, but at the end of the day an air of uncertainty will sweep back over them.

However, because of programs such as this — a joint effort involving Outdoor Outreach and the San Diego Oceans Foundation — horizons are broadened and dreams are spawned.

This summer, with the help of volunteers, the groups will complete 26 "Ocean in Motion" snorkeling adventures in Mission Bay. Outdoor Outreach, which partners with many schools and agencies, also arranges surfing camps, snowboarding trips and rock-climbing excursions for kids who might otherwise never



ALLEN J. SCHABER/Los Angeles Times

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE: Adam Gomez, 13, snorkels for the first time in San Diego's Mission Bay, thanks to a joint effort involving Outdoor Outreach and the San Diego Oceans Foundation to help at-risk or homeless youth.

venture beyond gritty urban areas.

Since 2001 the nonprofit — whose mission is to instill confidence and self-esteem — has treated nearly 3,000 underprivileged children to more than 700 outdoor adventures.

"One of the biggest issues with them is that they have no positive adult role models in their lives," says Chris Rutgers, founder and executive director. "And this is a way, an uncontrived way, to connect these kids with good solid positive adult role models."

Rutgers describes his childhood as "violently abusive." He left home when he turned 18 and ended up at a Utah resort, working as a dishwasher.

He fell passionately in love with the outdoors, became a professional skier, a river guide, rock climber and surfer. "In a very real sense the outdoors saved my life," he says.

His award-winning outreach program has been shown to improve graduation rates among participating students, who are chosen based on grades and behavior.

Many have become trip instructors. One kid, brought in via the probation department, is now trying to make it as a pro snowboarder.

"It's interesting," Rutgers says, "because almost invariably the bigger the rap sheet of the kid, and the worse the kid is supposed to be, the better they are out here because they have never been to the beach or the mountains, and they're just so grateful for the experience."

Apprehensive is the mind-set among the Monarch students, as they struggle into wetsuits and don masks and fins while wondering what perils might await them.

Waist deep in the tranquil bay, Courtney Gosch, program

director for the Oceans Foundation, coaxes a few who want to back out, while volunteers gather around those needing help.

Girls on either side of Ann Marie McCann, a volunteer from Mission Viejo, are squeezing her fingers with the grip of an octopus as she guides them along the breakwater.

Soon, she accurately predicts, the girls will let go and begin showing her the animals.

Lindsey Robinson, a volunteer from San Diego, likewise has her hands full, and who can blame the kids? This strange universe is moss-covered and shadowy.

Those critters that latch onto rocks, Maritza Campos fears, might also latch onto her.

At least you can see those critters, Shantel Arlantino reasons, far more concerned about those that might be lurking in the tall sea grass

"What if I drown?" asks Debra Flores, before discovering that snorkeling is easy and, in fact, enjoyable.

Eventually, the girls catch the boys and Gosch begins pulling up critters for inspection.

Hermit crabs, who are constantly outgrowing their seashell homes and have to look for others, are admired with respect.

A purple urchin, whose long spines serve as legs as it crawls slowly across an outstretched palm, is alien-like but cute.

The navanax and other slugs wriggle through fingers as their captors' faces cringe and contort.

And as for the keyhole limpet, with its semi-conical shell patterned after the eye of a whale, it may be as salty as the world in which it lives.

But maybe it will bring luck anyway.

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