

Trip to the Back Bay yields native plant life

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The tide was high in Newport's Back Bay on Wednesday morning, which gave students from Costa Mesa High School the chance to get up close and personal with the bay's wildlife, like the rare Little Blue Heron.

Birdwatchers shushed the students as they walked by on their field trip for AP Environmental Science, saying they'd never before seen the bird in the bay before. In addition to other animals like roadrunners and bobcats, it's among the wildlife returning to the habitat as it undergoes long-term restoration efforts.

Those efforts are punctuated by the Community-Based Restoration and Education Program, which invites students like the ones from Costa Mesa to its headquarters at the Back Bay Science Center. The program is a nonprofit wing of the California Coastal Commission.

The students first learn about the history and culture at the bay, then it's off to work. Geared with shovels and native purple needle grass, they retreat to the hills for habitat restoration. The class, led by AP Environmental Science teacher Cristen Rasmussen comes two times a year for the restoration projects.

The students planted more than 50 bunches of purple needle grass. They picked up the grass from the center's nursery, which grows other native plants like it throughout the year to be planted along the bay.

Yurko said the center gets up to 2,000 volunteers who help with the projects every year for the past 11 years the center has been open.

Now, he said, they are starting to see more companies bring their employees to work on habitat restoration as a team building exercise. Soon he hopes the center will be part of the growing ecotourism industry - he's speaking with hotels now about setting up excursions for those visiting the bay, which would involve habitat restoration efforts.

Over the past 11 years, Yurko said the result is mostly a shift in environmental awareness - more and more groups are contacting him to come help with the projects. Removing all the invasive species in the bay will take much longer, but he has seen more native wild life return to the bay, he said.

"Nature will heal itself," Yurko said. "We just have to push it in that direction sometimes."

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