

Field trips, Stewardship & Relationships:

THE COTTONWOOD SCHOOL

By Tim LaBarge

for Friends of Tryon Creek



For most school groups, a visit to Tryon Creek State Natural Area is a one-day affair that includes a hike in the woods and an educational program that focuses on topics like adaptable insects or the trees of Tryon. At The Cottonwood School in Portland, however, students in fourth and fifth grade have the rare opportunity to return to the park as many as six times throughout the school year, learning about stream and forest life and developing a long-term respect for a natural area.

Sarah Anderson, the Fieldwork and Place-Based Education Coordinator for the school, juggles the students' schedules and destinations for their various projects outside of the classroom. "Tryon Creek State Natural Area has served as a perfect place for students to learn more about the ecology of Oregon forests and watersheds. Equally important, the park offers students a natural area where they can explore, play, and have experiences that they will remember into adulthood. This will help raise the next generations of stewards for our world," she says.

While several grade levels from Cottonwood will visit Tryon at least once this school year, the fourth and fifth graders will return again and again and again. It's all part of the school's Adopt-a-Place Program that every grade level participates in. Visits to natural areas selected include service and restoration as well as curriculum-based activities.

"Cottonwood's Adopt-a-Place approach mirrors Tryon's Adopt-A-Plot program. Volunteers pledge to improve an acre within the Park and they can see progress throughout the year," says Amy Stout, volunteer coordinator for Friends of Tryon Creek.

A match made in Tryon

The Friend's mission is "to inspire and nurture relationships with nature in our unique urban forest." That goal fits in well with The Cottonwood School's mission: "To provide a creative learning environment where students develop a deep sense of place and belonging and work to become engaged stewards of the natural world around them and active citizens within our community."

By connecting students with natural areas and other places in the community throughout the year, Anderson says, they develop positive habits that they'll carry into adulthood. "It's empowering for students to physically improve a place where they live. Even as young people, they can have a tangible impact on their place."

Friends of Tryon Creek's Amy Stout enjoys seeing the students' growth throughout the year. Cottonwood's unique arrangement is really a combination of service days and field trips. "It's important for students to get out of the classroom and work together and over time, see the impact of the service they're providing," she says. "Cottonwood's place-based education model allows for this to happen. It's more than just a service day."

By visiting Tryon Creek throughout the school year, the students witness not only the change they've helped create in a patch of forest, but they get to see the changes in the seasons. They see the maple leaves turn shades of yellow and fall to the forest floor. They walk the muddy trails through foggy mornings. They see the trilliums bloom.

"The real pay off," Anderson says, "will come after not just one year of visits, but a long-term relationship with local lands throughout childhood. This is how authentic, deep connections are formed, as well as a sense of ownership."

Rowman & Littlefield recently released Sarah Anderson's book about place-based education titled *Bringing School to Life: Place-based Education across the Curriculum*. It can be purchased on the publisher's website, Amazon or other online outlets.

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781475830613/Bringing-School-to-Life-Place-Based-Education-Across-the-Curriculum>

