

Habitat Stewardship Initiative

Ocean Discovery Institute, a San Diego based non-profit organization, educates urban youth about science, the ocean and nature through tuition-free programs, creating the next generation of scientific and environmental leaders. The *Habitat Stewardship Initiative* is a community-based watershed education and habitat restoration initiative that utilizes an innovative approach to engender environmental awareness and action, as well as increased enjoyment and stewardship of the natural world.

Project Narrative

The initiative created connections between the highly urbanized, low-income community of City Heights and the blighted wetland and canyon habitats within. The three components of the project are highlighted below.



Collaboration and Capacity Building

A **City Heights Canyons and Communities Alliance (CCA)** was established to collaborate with other groups to integrate the City Heights community with their canyons. The CCA created a multi-disciplinary model (including restoration, education, public access, public health, enforcement, land acquisition, community organizing, and maintenance) and a work plan to guide its direction. The CCA

convenes monthly to monitor progress toward work plan goals, conduct canyon walks, and meet with community and regional leaders. CCA members include the City of San Diego Park & Recreation, Open Space Division; Hamilton Elementary School; Hoover High School Eco Club; Monroe Clark Middle School Builder's Club; Project C.L.E.A.N.; San Diego Canyonlands; San Diego Police Department, Mid City Division; Swan Canyon Neighborhood Association; and North Swan Canyon Neighborhood Association.



Education and Research

Ocean Discovery Institute conducted elementary school education programs for **270 students in City Heights schools** utilizing the canyon habitat, and outdoor classroom and garden to teach standards-based scientific principles and further connect to students' canyon and natural environments. These included professional development for teachers and hands-on lessons and experiences directly in the canyon for students. Through the experiential environmental science program, students gained a broader understanding of local wildlife, wetland and watershed habitats, and the importance of their actions.

High school students were also provided with education through a **REACH (Restoration, Education, and Action in City Heights) internship**. REACH is an Ocean Discovery Institute project led by five Hoover High School students in City Heights. REACH's mission is to strengthen quality of life, improve community health and protect nature in City Heights, by connecting the community to their canyon environments. REACH students worked closely with the community, including the CCA and elected representatives, to conduct research, lead

restoration and education projects in the canyons and surrounding neighborhoods, and reach out to the media (such as *Despierta San Diego*) and local organizations (such as the Unified Port of San Diego and the Mid City Community Advocacy Network.)



Restoration and Action

San Diego Canyonlands has worked with neighborhood associations adjacent to Swan Canyon to **establish Friends of Swan Canyon**. The “Friends” group has **over 250 members** and conducts monthly restoration projects and educational tours. They collaborate with Ocean Discovery Institute to determine site needs and recruit volunteers to steward the restoration area. In addition, Ocean Discovery Institute has held five community-based restoration projects to continue the work completed at the *Wetland Avengers/Campeones de los Cañones* event. In total, **an additional 440 volunteers have contributed 1,320 hours** to restoring Swan Canyon.