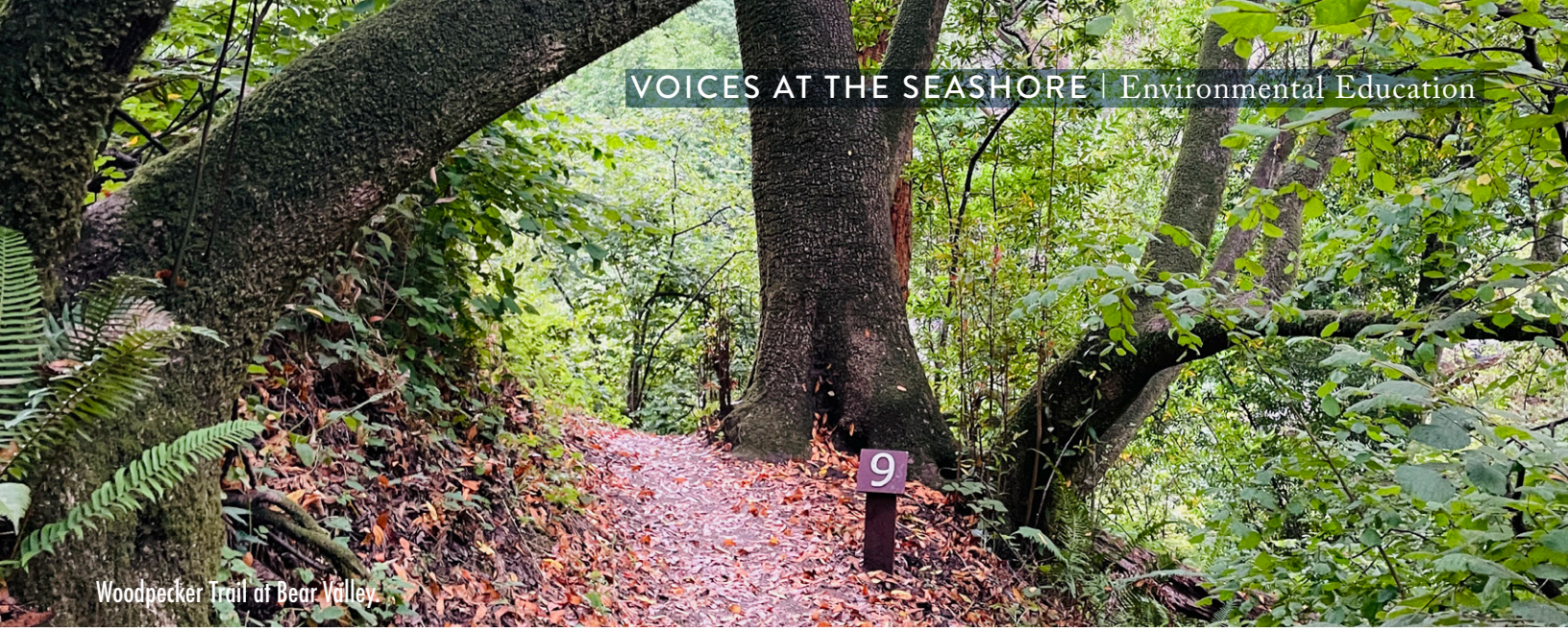
Voices at the Seashore

Nature's Classroom

Reframing Outdoor Education with Francesca, Ria, and Celeste

What happens when you go beyond curriculum to connect youth more personally with Point Reyes?

In this collective article, Bilingual Environmental Educators Ria Espinoza, Francesca Dezza Parada, and Celeste Chavez Hernandez push beyond content in their outdoor programming. They present fun moments, self-love, mindful observations, and unique experiences as they broaden pathways to learning and connecting youth with the Seashore. From Francesca's collaborative approach to Ria's commitment to authenticity and Celeste's focus on emotional connections, this piece showcases the adaptability of outdoor learning, emphasizing that everyone has a place in the natural world.



Woodpecker Trail at Bear Valley.

Collaborative Learning

BY FRANCESCA DEZZA PARADA

One of the most exciting parts about being an environmental educator is that I get to continue to learn and grow along with the youth we do programming with. I have loved working with the education team at PRNSA thinking about the ways in which we create accessible and enriching learning experiences for everyone. An important aspect of this is breaking down barriers that our society has created, whether theoretical or physical, that work to sever personal relationships with the outdoors. This includes resisting the idea that there is only one way to experience and learn from our natural surroundings and the different beings we come into contact with when outside. It is so important to weave in stories and sociocultural contexts to our scientific learning and to resist the idea that there is a hierarchy to ways of knowing and learning. I believe in also challenging this hierarchy in the personal relationships I form with the students I encounter, no matter their age, and emphasizing that I am also learning in community with them.

One of my favorite program moments happened when exploring decomposition and matter cycling through ecosystems on a hike with a group of fifth graders and their guardians on the Woodpecker Trail at Bear Valley. We stopped at a decomposing log, using all of our senses to explore and question what we were observing. I encouraged the adults to actively engage in this exploration and when one parent posed a question I redirected the question to the students. The students immediately had wonderful observations and follow-up questions to engage in this question and work through their answer in community with this adult and I felt so lucky to be a part of this moment where we are all excited to be learning together!

Educators Francesca (pictured left) and Ria (right) teach a Youth in Parks program.

RESIST THE IDEA THAT THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO LEARN

Youth in Parks program at Chimney Rock with California Conservation Corps.

Authenticity Outdoors

BY RIA ESPINOZA

Educator Ria teaches a Youth in Parks program.

It's hard to be outdoorsy when you don't fit the 'perfect hiker' mold. I don't have fancy gear, and I'm not overly extroverted, but I still love being in nature. As an educator, I enjoy showing kids that you don't need to act a certain way or look a certain way to be outdoors. Many times when hiking I purposely don't wear generic gear or clothes like rain pants and hiking boots. I opt for more casual, expressive clothing like jeans, sandals, and jewelry. While hiking in sandals may seem unprofessional, it's about showing kids that if I can work here without all the typical outdoorsy apparel, they can be here in that way too. Embracing that you can walk outdoors and recreate wearing anything you want can also help bring in more cultural inclusivity.

Being ourselves in the outdoors extends to the lessons we teach. My favorite memory is taking the California Conservation Corps crew members to Chimney Rock to whale watch and observe elephant seals. Both of these animals have powerful migration stories. It's rewarding to remind the crew members that migration is natural. Many species do it for different reasons, many humans do it as a result of global political power dynamics. To be able to talk about migration in its pure form is validating and reassuring to many people. In this way, I like to remove potential migration shame and focus on migration as part of nature and life. We can always benefit from observing natural patterns and noticing how humans are just that.

As human beings, we are all part of this natural world, and we all have the right to show up as ourselves and be accepted in this space. This space is open for all with no expectations.

BEING OURSELVES OUTDOORS EXTENDS TO LESSONS WE TEACH

The Clem Miller Environmental Education Center.

Natural Connections

BY CELESTE CHAVEZ HERNANDEZ

I love that I get to explore the beauty of Point Reyes with kids who have varying levels of comfort with the outdoors. Some kids come with stories of family hikes, camping adventures, and snow trips during winter break. Other kids come with less exposure and more hesitancy, but offering a chance for all youth to create their connection with nature is incredibly important. There's no 'right' way of being outside and as an environmental educator, I get to show youth that they are actually already practicing science and creating their relationships with the natural world.

Part of my job is teaching and learning about the natural processes and phenomena present in Point Reyes. But aside from having a scientific understanding of what's occurring in the park, it's equally important for me to have an emotional understanding of the healing properties of spending time in nature. I'm grateful for the ability to grow my connection with the land through spending time alone and with others on the trails, beaches, and creeks where we teach. As an educator and fellow human, it's vital that I convey to the kids that being outdoors doesn't have to be either science-focused or pleasure-focused—it can be both!

Educators Celeste (right) and Ria (left) teach a Youth in Parks program.

A few weeks back, I was teaching an program on marine debris and pollution. I was at the Clem Miller Ed Center with a group of middle schoolers who were feeling the lack of sleep from their stay but still engaging in discussions with me about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, ocean currents, trash lifetimes, marine mammals, and what connects us all. Out of nowhere, I hear a loud gasp from one of the students staring out the window. We all gathered to watch a bobcat take in the sun's rays. Initially, on this day I was expecting the students to be left wondering about marine life and the implications of pollution on our ecosystems. Still, I love that we all shared a special moment of observation and awe. That feeling of amazement is just as important as anything I was teaching about at the moment. That amazement is why environmental education is SO important.

THERE IS NO 'RIGHT' WAY OF BEING OUTSIDE