

Kids help clean Malibu Creek of crustaceans

By Robyn Flans

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About 40 children participated in an environmental project Saturday at Tapia Park to help eradicate invasive crawfish that destroy Malibu Creek's ecosystem.

The students from the Mar Vista Citizens of the World charter school, which serves kindergarten through second grade, worked on the project south of Agoura Hills with the Mountains Restoration Trust.

After seeing Holly Adams from AmeriCorps get pinched by a crawfish, Esteban Gonzalez, 6 wasn't eager to get too close to one. But he was happy to hold the ruler while Adams measured the crustacean that had been lured into a mesh minnow trap by a dog biscuit.

"This is great," Esteban said.

Within about 10 minutes, he was able to identify the sex of the crawfish and tell Adams its size.

Esteban's sister Kathy, 14, offered to help by recording the data on a clipboard sheet.

Their mother, Ruby Gonzalez, looked on.

"I hope Esteban learns to be in the wildlife and about all these animals and get a good experience out of it," she said.

Zed Starkovich brought his daughter Sage, 6.

"She's into science," he said. "She likes nature and hikes, so it's cool."

M.J. Kang, field trip coordinator for the school, said the activity served multiple purposes.

"This is an amazing opportunity for children to learn about natural species, about biology and help the community," Kang said.

Aside from the children, there were many others working to make a difference.

Greta Davis, environmental programs coordinator at Pepperdine University, brought four students.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how our community can take care of our environment,"

Davis said. "This is our backyard."

For Ben Medley, a restoration technician from the trust, the effort is part of his life's work.

Medley said anti-crawfish effort began in September 2011, with about 30 traps being set three days a week. He estimates upwards of 35,000 of the shellfish that resemble miniature lobsters have been trapped in a section of Malibu Creek downstream from Las Virgenes Road.

"Based on that, there must be hundreds of thousands, upwards of a million," Medley said.

He said crawfish, indigenous to Louisiana, likely were brought here decades ago as bait for sport fishing.

"Sometimes crawfish get off the hook, sometimes they get loose out of the bait bucket and into the water, and they are voracious reproducers," Medley said. "They can have hundreds of babies at a time, and the temperate climate here in Southern California allows them to reproduce year-round."

Medley said they not only eat and prey on native species, but also compete with them for space and food.

"When they're aggressive toward native organisms, they push them into marginal habitat, and it doesn't not allow them to efficiently feed or reproduce like they normally would without the presence of these invasive critters," Medley said.

Medley said after the crawfish are caught, they are humanely euthanized in a freezer. Because they are coldblooded, they slowly go to sleep and are donated to the California Wildlife Center, where they are fed to injured raccoons and possums.

"Talking to other scientists and ecologists in the region, the prospect of completely eradicating them is probably not a possibility," Medley said.

"Our goal is to knock out the population enough to allow the native species to come back and effectively compete for those resources in the stream."

