

'Beautiful Like My Culture'

Dine' Students Camp at the Grand Canyon
with the Arizona Trail Association's Seeds of Stewardship Program



Arizona Trail Association, June 2026

Trip report and photos by Clay Showalter

The Arizona Trail Association's Seeds of Stewardship (SOS) program provides free, meaningful outdoor experiences to inspire the next generation of stewards of trails and public lands.

Over the past four years, SOS has worked with the 5th through 8th grade students at STAR School (Service to All Relations), which serves Native American students from Flagstaff and the Navajo Nation. SOS takes each student out for four field trips during the school year, with a focus on facilitating culturally responsive outdoor experiences, connecting with the land and each other, and performing meaningful stewardship projects.



As a finale each school year with the 5th graders at STAR, SOS organizes three days of camping and cultural experiences at Grand Canyon National Park in partnership with Grand Canyon Tribal Affairs and Education Department.

After a full school year of anticipation from students and teachers, SOS educators arrived at STAR School with a 15-passenger van and a trailer loaded up with all camping gear, food and kitchen equipment needed for the trip. Students loaded their personal items into the trailer and we set off for our first destination: the Tribal Welcome Center in Grand Canyon National Park.

Lakin Espaloose (Zuni) and Anthony Edaakie (Zuni), Tribal Affairs Education Interns, met students at the Tribal Welcome Center before leading an interpretive program inside the Desert View Watchtower. They shared about the importance of Indigenous art and presence in the park, and led some fun activities with the students.



Lakin Espaloose leads an interpretive program at the Desert View Watchtower.

“To me, the Grand Canyon means my culture, because it’s beautiful like my culture.”

- Lyniah, 5th grade student at the STAR School



A student uses binoculars to look at the Colorado River from the Desert View Watchtower.

After visiting the tower, we were joined by Kelkiyana Yazzie (Dine'), Tribal Program Coordinator, who emphasized the cultural importance of sites like the Grand Canyon: “Places like this mean a lot to our people, our elders. Our Navajo people.”

Kelkiyana, Lakin, and Anthony all shared their personal pathways that brought them to the Grand Canyon as cultural interpreters. Lakin told students, “This canyon is important to my Zuni people, and many other tribes. That’s why I’m here.”

Anthony focussed on the importance of Indigenous representation in National Parks, and its impacts on Indigenous youth. All three wrapped up our time at the Watchtower by sharing various pathways to careers in cultural stewardship and interpretation, such as Conservation Legacy’s Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps.



A student holds foraged piñon nuts.

After lunch, we visited the Tusayan Pueblo, where Kelkiyana led an interpretive walk exploring what life was like in an Ancestral Pueblo. She discussed traditional farming practices along with native plants and their uses.

Many students drew connections between their own cultural knowledge and experiences and those of people living in Ancestral Pueblos, including the practice of gathering piñon nuts.

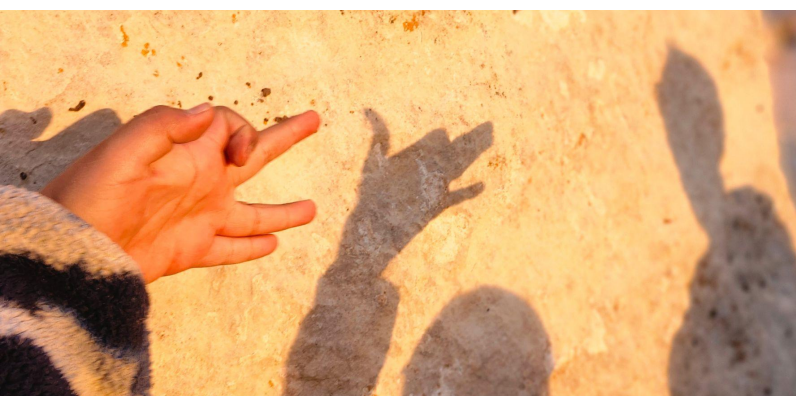
Next we headed to our group campsite at Mather Campground to set up camp and rest and relax before dinner and a sunset outing to Shoshone Point.

“The Grand Canyon is a spiritual place because my ancestors lived here.”

- Connor, 5th grade student at the STAR School

From the Shoshone Point shelter, students walked along the rim before pausing to journal about their growing relationships with the Grand Canyon.

As the sun began to dip down towards the horizon, we walked out to Shoshone Point, where, with the help of the golden light from the sun, hot cocoa, and wool blankets, students stayed warm and cozy as they experienced a truly spectacular sunset.



The next day, we woke up at camp and began our first morning in the park by taking a park bus to South Kaibab Trailhead.

Students continued to explore their connections with the canyon through art and journaling before we were met at the trailhead by RisingBuffalo Maybee (Arapaho/Seneca), Grand Canyon National Park Tribal Program Manager.

RisingBuffalo led an interpretive walk and shared about his own cultural connections to the Colorado River, as Northern Arapaho coming from the river's headwaters in Colorado.



Students make art in their journals at South Kaibab Trailhead.

“The Grand Canyon means connection, because I’m one of the eleven tribes connected to this place.”

- Demarcus, 5th grade student at the STAR School

RisingBuffalo also emphasized the importance of advocating for tribal voices in the management of National Parks, and highlighted efforts related to renaming park features to include Dine’ names. He also shared about his work including Dine’ ecological knowledge into fire management plans following the Dragon Bravo fire on the North Rim.

The walk wrapped up with RisingBuffalo asking students to teach him about their own cultural knowledge of the plants along the rim. He reflected back on the students the vast amount of traditional ecological knowledge they hold, and encouraged the students to bring that knowledge into careers in conservation and interpretation at cultural sites like the Grand Canyon.





After thanking RisingBuffalo for his work including tribal voices in the management of Grand Canyon National Park, we set off into the canyon on the South Kaibab Trail, which is also Passage 38 of the Arizona Trail. The Arizona Trail is one of eleven National Scenic Trails, and runs from the Mexico border to the Utah border, through the entire state of Arizona.

Students learned about trail safety and etiquette as we descended to Ooh Aah Point, where we paused for lunch before heading back to the South Rim to visit the Yavapai Geology Museum.

“People say that our ancestors are gone, but they are with us every moment.”

- Anthony Edaakie, Tribal Affairs Intern

Anthony visited students at camp before dinner and shared that this week was the 2026 Week of Action for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), an issue that most students were familiar with. He discussed way we can honor MMIW and advocate for change, and then taught students a Zuni ceremony offering food to the fire to feed and honor our ancestors.



Students explore different geologic features isolated in a moveable viewing tube at the overlook near the Yavapai Geology Museum.

Students create stories based on their hike in the canyon, using animal track linoleum block prints.

We packed up camp early on our third and final day to catch a showing the film *We Are Grand Canyon*, which welcomes visitors to the park with the voices of those who have called the Grand Canyon home since time immemorial.

After the film, Kelkiyana gathered students at the Tribal Medallion, which contains the name and symbols that represent each of the 11 Associated Tribes of the Grand Canyon.



Students view the film *We Are Grand Canyon*

“I’m proud that they made a movie about how we are still here.”

- Lyniah, 5th grade STAR student, after viewing the film *We Are Grand Canyon*

“It’s important for tribes to be present at the Canyon,” said Kelkiyana, as she discussed the thousands of years of human connections to Grand Canyon, and how the medallion reminds us of all those who have come this way before.

Our trip wrapped up at the Park Headquarters with a sneak peek viewing of the films *Songscales* and *Medicine Family*, the soon-to-be released parts two and three of *We are Grand Canyon*.

The Arizona Trail Association would like to thank all those who made this free camping trip possible:

Grand Canyon Tribal Affairs and Education Department

RisingBuffalo Maybee, Kelkiyana Yazzie, Monique Navarro, Lakin Espaloose, and Anthony Edaakie

Seeds of Stewardship Financial Sponsors

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Students stand at the Navajo section of the Tribal Medallion, which honors the 11 Associated Tribes of the Grand Canyon.