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“You got to let ‘em run around, or else the whole thing blows up on you.”

CHRIS GIORNI, science camp teacher



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Ryan Kessler and teacher Chris Giorni tried to net turtles at Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park during the California Academy of Sciences day camp.

Scientific Fun

‘Getting outside and finding things’ beats watching TV for Golden Gate Park museum's summer day campers



Ryan, 9, examined a fish caught at Stow Lake during the weeklong science day camp.

Learning About Science Beats Watching TV

By *Steve Rubenstein*
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

A turtle may be slow, but not when a dozen kids are coming after it with turtle nets, trying to do something educational. That's when a turtle shows it knows a thing or two of its own about natural selection.

Such was the lesson learned the other day at Stow Lake, where the members of the California Academy of Sciences day camp set off with their nets to find out what the bottom of a turtle looks like.

The only way to see the bottom of a turtle is to catch one.

"It's pretty difficult," said Steve Erickson, 12. "They can feel you coming. Then they slip away and go back into the water."

Finally, teacher Chris Giorni caught one. The kids crowded around and began learning things about it, such as the reason a turtle has fingernails is to pull the heads off of innocent little fishes, and that when a turtle sticks his head into its shell, there is no way to make the head come out until the turtle is good and ready.

While other kids are taking it easy this summer, the members of the academy's day camp have been hard at it, learning things. One day it's turtles at Stow Lake, and the next day it's butterflies on Mount San Bruno or spiders in Golden Gate Park.

Giorni, a 33-year-old science teacher from Placerville, knows a great deal about kids, since they are part of the biological world. He knows, for instance, that during summer vacation, you cannot lecture to a kid for more than 10 minutes at a pop.

"Then you got to let 'em run around," he said, "or else the whole thing blows up on you, and they go crazy."

Camper Corey Linehan, 10, said science camp is a lot better than sports camp, or even than the time-honored summer institution of lying around and watching TV.

"You can do sports anytime -- it's just playing," he said. "TV is just TV. This is getting outside and finding out things."

At science museum camp, every other word is "biodiversity" or "habitat". "They're both shrinking", said Giorni, "and it's all because of the most dangerous species in the biosphere, the two-legged one that sends its offspring to summer camp."

"We need to pay attention to what we're doing," Giorni said, and he wasn't talking about getting the net on a turtle, but on the big picture. "We have a brain. We have a conscience. We are the species that can predict what's going to happen."

About the only unpredictable thing at science museum camp is what comes next. Campers are never sure whether Giorni is going to pass around a stuffed gopher for them to feel ("If the fur grew in one direction, the gopher would get stuck"), or have them play a round of deer vs. wolves in the park ("Work together, wolves!"), or hand them a lion skull ("Look at the knifelike molars"), or ask them what it is that only goes up but never comes down.

That one got everyone thinking.

The campers put down their butterfly nets and sat in a circle and tried to figure it out. The answer wasn't the sun, or water, or clouds, or trees.

"Time," said Corey. "It only goes in one direction."

It turned out to be the right answer. Summer vacation is officially half over, campers, and the first part of it is never coming back. Soon enough it will be time to go back to school, a force of nature even more powerful than evolution, and learn real, official things from the kind of teachers who give homework.



Above: Day campers gathered with nets in hand at Stow Lake as they prepared to catch specimens for their study of pond life. Below: A pocket gopher entertained the camp kids.



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