

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

January 7, 2026

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Bren School environmental education for local teens reaches new heights at Dangermond Preserve

On a recent foggy morning, a bus full of students unloaded near Diamond Corrals, a wooded flat deep in Jalama Valley along the western edge of Santa Barbara County. All juniors and seniors at nearby Lompoc High School, they gathered near the empty livestock pens, surrounded by birdsong, rugged canyons and a forest of sage, sycamore and coast live oak. Their field trip at the Jack and Laura Dangermond Preserve was about to begin.

Greeting the kids, a handful of UC Santa Barbara graduate and undergraduate students broke into small groups and handed out curated bingo cards with squares ranging from lemonade berry and wild boar to lace lichen and turkey vultures. The game was designed to keep the kids keen on the rich diversity of flora and fauna common across the nature preserve's 24,000 acres.

The day's graduate student mentors were from UCSB's Bren Environmental Leadership ([BEL](#)) fellowship. The undergrads were paid interns from the field trip's programming lead, the university's longrunning [Kids in Nature](#) (KIN) environmental education program at the Cheadle Center. All of them were in training to teach natural science in the great outdoors, and together they would wrangle — and educate — these 45 high schoolers.

“Since its inception more than 20 years ago, many of the kids that have come through the KIN program had never been on a field trip before or even seen a creek up close,” said Cheadle Center staff Andrew Lanes, a UCSB alum with 15 years of professional experience in environmental education. “We’ve been learning how valuable environmental education is to these kids — and also to these college students, some of whom are coming from out of state and experiencing the outdoors in California for the first time.”

“We always envisioned this place to inspire the next generation of environmental leadership,” added Diego Ortiz, who manages environmental education programming for The Nature Conservancy, the global conservation nonprofit that owns the Dangermond Preserve. “This is a conservation career pathway program, and the launch pad for environmental education across our California chapter.”

Nature walk

As the fog lifted, the groups headed up Jalama Valley, bingo cards in hand. They stopped to look at oak branches hanging with the golfball-size galls that protect wasp eggs. They learned about female dusky-footed woodrats building nests in poison oak bushes as males made homes in the treetops. They circled up to guess at the species of mammal whose sunbleached bones littered the trailside. They looked up between branches to spot California scrub jays and soaring red-tailed hawks. Bingo cards slowly began to fill.

“Today we’re looking at biodiversity in the coast live oak ecosystem,” said science teacher Melissa Moore. The field trip group was among the 175 mostly underserved students that come through her classroom at Lompoc High every day. For this trip, Moore relied on assistance from the Bren School partnership, which worked closely with high school teachers, former educators and instructors at UCSB’s Gevirtz Graduate School of Education to curate lesson plans aligned with grade-level standards. “I can bring my students here and know that they are getting relevant information,” she said. Ahead of the trip, many of these same BEL fellows visited Lompoc High to introduce her classroom to the preserve’s natural history.

Under the oak

BEL fellow Lesley Figueroa, a third-year Bren School doctoral student studying environmental science and management, guided her group into the shade of a giant oak, where the earth sprouted with seedlings and saplings. She pointed to one and asked, “How was this little oak planted here and why is it doing so well?”

One student guessed that it sprouted from an acorn buried by a scrub jay. Another said maybe it’s from an acorn dropped by the tree during a windstorm.

Good answers, said Figueroa. She answered the second part of her question by scooping a handful of leaf litter and rich black soil that was supplying nutrients to the young tree. The giant tree above, she added, is a keystone species, providing habitat, shelter and nourishment to a wide variety of living things in the coast live oak ecosystem.

Figueroa and [other BEL fellows](#) plan to continue their community engagement in 2026, mentoring more young students at the Dangermond Preserve and on outings across the [UC Santa Barbara Natural Reserve System](#).

About 90 minutes into the hike, 11th grader Kenji Xiong yelled, “Bingo!” as he filled the winning square of a row that included boar bones, oak galls, cattle, coyote scat and feathers from a mourning dove. There was no winning prize for Xiong — except for the memory of the day as it stood out from typical school experiences.

“In a classroom, you get images and explanations,” Xiong said. “But out here, you get a more personal experience. You can see and feel these things yourself. Interacting like this is more fun and memorable.”

After about two miles of easy hiking, the groups settled down for lunch in the shade of towering oaks and sycamores. In the dry creekbed nearby, sandstone boulders were etched with seashell fossils.

“There’s a lot of nature here that we just don’t have in Lompoc,” said 11th grader Alyssa Jimenez. “It’s really pretty and very calming.”

Her friend Hailey jumped in, “And there’s no cell service, so you’re not on your phone the whole time.”

After lunch, the students walked slowly back to Diamond Corrals. They stopped to compare and contrast leaves from different shrubs and trees. They learned how to tell the difference between coyote and fox scat. They marveled at oak trunks pitted with thousands of hollows carved out by acorn woodpeckers.

Along the way, their UCSB mentors prompted them to think about their day at the preserve, what they learned and the value of hands-on education in nature.

Hailey didn't hesitate. "There's fresh air, and it's not as crowded," she said. "I'd much rather be out here than sitting in a classroom. Out here, it seems like I absorb and remember more information."

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