

**Developing a Discovery Hike**

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Steward Education Program

**Introduction**

Discovery Hikes are an important part of the Steward Education Program. They provide a direct link among the visitors, the Preserve, the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy (MSC), and our mission to educate the public about the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and the Sonoran Desert. This handout will inform you about developing a Discovery Hike beginning with some FAQs followed with a step-by-step guide.

**FAQs About Discovery Hikes**

**What is a Discovery Hike?** A Discovery Hike is a public hike that serves to educate the general public on some aspect of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and the Sonoran Desert.

**Who normally participates in a Discovery Hike?** Discovery Hikes are meant for members of the general public who wish to learn more about the Preserve and the Sonoran Desert. However, stewards also participate in Discovery Hikes. It is an enjoyable way to earn continuing education credits.

**Where are Discovery Hikes offered?** Discovery Hikes can be offered on almost any trail in the McDowell Sonoran Preserve. However, certain trails lend themselves better for certain themes such as geology or medicinal plants.

**Who can lead a Discovery Hike?** Discovery Hikes are led by MSC stewards who are qualified as hike leaders. However, there are occasions where an expert, who is not a steward, develops a discovery hike. In such cases, the protocol does not change: a hike leader from the MSC must lead the public hike.

**Who can develop a Discovery Hike?** More often than not, hike leaders are the stewards who develop Discovery Hikes.

**Developing a Discovery Hike: Step-by-step Guide**

There are probably as many ways to develop a Discovery Hike as there are hike leaders. That said, the following steps can be used as a guideline. The development of ‘Architecture in the Desert,’ a recent addition to Discovery Hikes, will serve as an example.

**Step 1:** **Select a theme.** The theme for a Discovery Hike should connect a topic of public interest with the Sonoran Desert. ‘Architecture in the Desert’ was selected as a theme for three reasons: 1) Architecture is a popular topic for many people; 2) the Sonoran Desert provides many examples of animal habitat, e.g. a bird’s nest; and 3) Frank Lloyd Wright designed architecture at Taliesin West that made direct connections to the desert.

**Step 2:** **Research the theme thoroughly.** This can be achieved by way of a review of literature on the theme, information found on the Internet, and by connecting with fellow stewards who are experts in some aspects of the theme. The theme may also be one for which you already have a great deal of knowledge. Once collated, this information is used to write the first script. For ‘Architecture in the Desert,’ relevant material on animal architecture was found in known sources and with information provided by fellow stewards. A docent with Taliesin West, who knew a great deal about Frank Lloyd Wright, also provided assistance.

**Step 3:** **Create a narrative.** To be successful a discovery hike must be more than encyclopedic entries delivered one after another. There should be a narrative. The narrative for the Architecture hike was quite simple. It was a comparison of how animals have created habitats in the desert, how humans have done the same, and how humans have learned from Nature…or not!

**Step 4:** **Locate a trail that supports the theme.** Certain trails in the Preserve are better suited for certain themes. Consequently, your prior knowledge of the trails will assist you in selecting one trail over another. Moreover, keep in mind that a Discovery Hike is a public hike and must be suitable to a range of hikers. Issues such as distance, elevation gain, and time on the trail must be taken into account. At this point, you need to be connecting your first script (Step 2) to the trail. For ‘Architecture in the Desert,’ two trails were initially considered: Quartz Trail and Taliesin Overlook. Both trails were hiked and proved to be quite similar in distance, elevation gain, and time on the trail. In the end, however, Taliesin Overlook was selected because it provided a clearer topographical demarcation between animal habitat and human habitat. Finding the appropriate trail is important in making the Discovery Hike successful.

**Step 5:** **Dress rehearsal.** At this point in the development, the information that has been assembled needs to fit with the venue selected for the hike. A dress rehearsal is now in order because what appears on paper, i.e. your script, may not neatly fit the trail selected. Adjustments will most likely be necessary. For ‘Architecture in the Desert,’ it became clear that examples of animal habitat such as holes and nests were found here and there. Rather than introduce them as they occurred on the trail, the script was changed in such a way that a logical pattern of habitats was presented, e.g. animal habits below ground, on the ground, and above ground. In order to accentuate the contrast, human habitat was left to the very end.

**Step 6:** **A pre-hike.** The new Discovery Hike is now ready for its first presentation, albeit to a small and select audience of stewards. Doing a pre-hike is always recommended, but it becomes imperative for a new Discovery Hike. Having other stewards review the hike is invaluable. For ‘Architecture in the Desert,’ the pre-hike not only reinforced certain thematic elements of the hike but also added a few new ones.

**Step 7:** **A first offering.** The first offering of a new Discovery Hike can be unnerving. It need not be so, however. Your audience is certainly friendly and is happy to be on a hike. You also have other stewards to support you. On the Architecture hike, I provided additional information (e.g. facts, photos of animals, etc.) via plastic-coated sheets. Never forget that a pubic hike is a learning experience, not only for the guests but for the hike leader as well. Listen for comments and make mental notes of modifications for the next offering of the hike. After the hike, get feedback from the stewards who accompanied you. For ‘Architecture in the Desert,’ a stop at a fallen saguaro was focused on insects and how they create a habitat from the remains of the saguaro. A comment about the Navajo hogan later in the hike was a point of reflection: that fallen saguaro was like a miniature hogan. This insight will now became part of the next offering of ‘Architecture in the Desert.’

**Summary**

There is great satisfaction in developing and offering a Discovery Hike. At first it may appear to be an insurmountable challenge. It isn’t, especially if taken one step at a time. More than that, there are many seasoned hike leaders who are willing to assist you. Just call on them.

**Note**

Please be aware that the Conservancy must approve all handouts given to the public.