



## FOURTH GRADERS LEARN TO MAKE BETTER DECISIONS AND PROTECT THE PLACES THEY LOVE

Most of us can remember a special place from our childhood -- a playground, a wild space, a vacation spot. But fewer among us can remember making an effort to save these places.

Earlier this year, 25 fourth graders from East Palo Alto Charter School stepped just a few yards beyond their classroom -- into the Baylands Nature Preserve -- and found a wilderness teeming with animal life. Under the guidance of Ken Clarkson and Mark Batchelor from the Nature Studies Program at the Riekes Center for Human Enhancement, a non-profit youth enrichment program based in Menlo Park, the students set about collecting species data from the Baylands and recording it on donated Palm® Pilot™ PDAs. The process they used is known as "Cyber-Tracking."



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Although the data collection process can be fun in itself, the Riekes staff decided to take the project one step further and invited the Decision Education Foundation (DEF), a Palo Alto-based non-profit dedicated to teaching young people how to make good decisions, to participate. Meg Barrager, a program director at DEF, and Ken Clarkson, director of the Riekes Nature Program, who met at a DEF summer course, set out to combine conservation and earth stewardship with decision skills training. The connection was clear to them, but the how still needed work. And that's where cyber-tracking came in. If the kids could collect data and learn the decision basics at the same time, then they could take action to protect the natural beauty and wild inhabitants found right in their own back yard. Should they put more trash cans in the area? A bench for sitting? Lobby to the local city council?

Meg and Ken visited Ms. Kling's fourth grade class to help the students brainstorm their ideas. Together they used the key learnings from the marsh exploration project to develop recommendations for protecting this fragile area. Meg helped them to create a simplified adaptation of a "DecisionTree," a graphic tool widely used by decision scientists to understand the relationships among decisions, information and consequences. They learned to think about their own personal values, the information they had gathered during their research, what alternatives they should propose and possible outcomes they could imagine. For Ms. Kling's kids, the Decision Tree was a real one -- with roots, branches, leaves and fruits.

Better Decisions - Better Lives

“The kids were incredible,” says Meg. “They came up with all kinds of possible outcomes and seemed to understand more deeply than many adults what a decision is! They were truly involved and raised issues such as difficult tradeoffs: ‘If we decide to build a bench on the Baylands, we might destroy animal homes but we also might encourage more people to enjoy the space and protect it. How can we choose?’”

“They acknowledged that the decisions they faced were more complex than they had thought. And at the end of the day, they asked their teacher if Ms. Meg and Mr. Ken could come back next year and help them talk to the City Council!”



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*Good decision-making is an essential life skill, but most people acquire it only through a process of trial and error – if at all. We equip people with powerful decision-making skills to help them better shape their futures in an uncertain world. In particular, our curriculum provides youth with the decision skills to take control of their fates and proactively map out their lives’ paths. This curriculum is based on a proven approach to making good decisions.*

*By educating people in decision-making and arming them with effective methods, we will enable them to tackle their decisions in a more enlightened and empowered manner. We pay special attention to youth at greatest risk from bad decision-making.*

*Today’s youth are tomorrow’s leaders. Clearer thinking about decision-making will yield profound benefits for us all.*

*The Decision Education Foundation is a not-for-profit organization.  
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