

Reflections on Expedition Whitney

Dear First and Second Year Parents and Students,

3/30/14

I was doing some cleanup today at Odyssey in the wake of the Expedition Whitney trip and thought it might be nice to put together a few thoughts on the trip while it's still fresh in my mind. Students tire of answering every question and some parents despair of getting any details at all of a journey from their children, so perhaps this can help to strike a middle ground: not so personal as to invade a student's sense of privacy, but with enough information to give parents a sense of what transpired. You'll notice it's neither chronological nor exhaustive, but rather a collection of highlights.

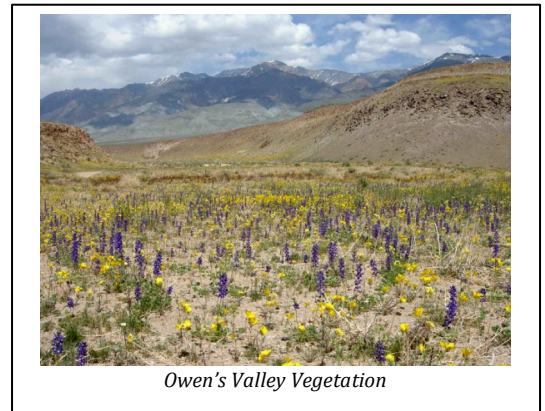
Cheers,
Jon

The Weather – Given that we've returned to a week of rain in the Bay Area and snow/rain in the very areas we've just left, it might be best to start with the news that we were gifted with excellent weather throughout our journey. On our arrival on Monday we had evening weather so warm it was even possible to forgo a jacket. We gathered around a campfire and Steveo gave a talk to set the tone for the trip and outline expectations. Students had half an hour after this to enjoy the brilliant starscape on display in the crystal clear night air. On Tuesday night and Wednesday the Sierras far above us were covered in clouds as a snow storm played out high above our heads. From our position though, in Big Pine at 4,000 feet and later in Lone Pine at 5,600 feet, we had dry, almost balmy weather. The evenings and mornings in Big Pine were warmer than those at Odyssey and while our mornings in the Lone Pine campground were a little cool they were sunny and wind free. Late at night in the Lone Pine campground the temperatures dropped significantly, but we at that point we were safely in our tents and sleeping bags.

The storm that had ranged across the peaks on Tuesday and Wednesday, hiding the summits beneath dramatic billowing clouds like some kind of Olympian power play, cleared on Thursday morning as if on cue, drawing back the curtains to reveal the vigorous, sinewy Sierras freshly dusted with snow. Our hike up Whitney took place in the best of weather: very moderate temperatures, windless crisp air, and cobalt, clear skies dominated by spectacular views of Whitney.

The Whitney Ascent – Front and center for practically the entire hike was Mt. Whitney, *towering* directly over us – beautiful, strong, sharp, a powerful lodestone.

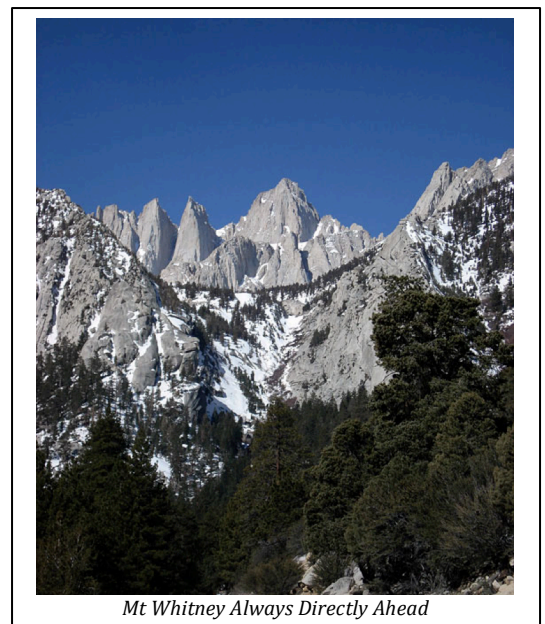
From our base camp at 5,600 feet we were positioned at the start of our Whitney Portal National Recreational Trail trailhead. We climbed up, up, always up, from the arid Owen's Valley sand and scrub where the late morning sun beat down relentlessly. We walked for 20 minutes up out of the campground on mostly flat scrubland, then climbed a lightly treed, sandy foothill with a steepness reminiscent of Odyssey's back yard (if you can imagine it traversed by switchbacks for about 30 minutes worth of climbing). Here we we reached the treeline proper and from this vantage, before turning into the canyon, we were rewarded with a beautiful backward view over the Alabama Hills, Owen's valley and the White Mountains. From this point on we hiked beneath trees along a forested canyon, sometimes high above it and other times beside or crossing the creek on a trail that was sometimes flat, sometimes downward sloping, but mostly heading up. While the day's sun was at its strongest we were beneath the trees and treated to the sound of the rushing snow melt Meysan creek.



Owen's Valley Vegetation



Owen's Valley & White Mts From First Foothill



Mt Whitney Always Directly Ahead

As we wound up out of the valley and through the granite and conifer canyon, Mt. Whitney remained always in front of us, with clean, rugged lines against the crystal blue sky and beneath a light sheen of snow from the previous night's storm.

As he had done each day Steveo set the tone with a group talk, and on this day Steveo had laid out the plan for the day shortly before leaving, with an emphasis on safety, trail conditions, our objectives as a group, and a clearly modulated set of expectations that would allow every student to reach their highest potential. Students were allowed to choose for themselves which of three groups they would join, each with slightly different parameters (speed of hike, distance goals, etc.). The success of the hike was to stem in no small part from this careful and clear leadership.

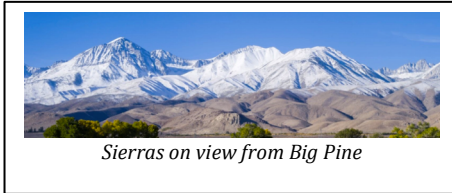
We walked in three groups of roughly equal sizes, each with two adults (at point and sweep): Steveo and Sophia with the first group, Jon and Lisa with the second group, and Aviva and Brad with the third group. The groups were staggered; each departing 5 minutes before the next and taking frequent rests at roughly similar intervals, with frequent communication between groups via radio. Lunch was taken along the trail. We encountered very little snow, just a couple patches of ice along the trail, but were treated to sweeping vistas and constantly changing vignettes along the canyon. The hike was dominated by the rushing Meysan creek, gently swaying Sequoias, cool, rough strewn granite, and Odyssey chatter.

To a person the Odyssey students were superb. Every single student made it to the lower Whitney Campground: walking uphill for 4 miles and climbing more than 2,000 feet to an elevation of 8,100 feet. This was a fantastic accomplishment and many students achieved far, far more than they imagined they could. For this they deserve great praise, as do Aviva and Brad for inspiring their group and demonstrating that each and every student had it in them to make it to that point. It's possible that some students in Aviva and Brad's group, the third of the groups and self selected into a group that was defined to walk at a slower pace and possibly turn around earlier if need be, began the hike less confident than others that they could reach the top, but they demonstrated through their actions that it was just as achievable for them as anyone else and they arrived in good spirits after walking at roughly the same pace as everyone else. The Odyssey students made the hike look like a relatively simple affair; much to the amazement (and frank complements) of adults we met walking the same trail. It was also clear that the days of preparation and acclimatization had paid off. Resting beneath the Sequoia trees on the park benches of the campground and enjoying some snacks with Whitney overhead, everyone had something to celebrate.

After a roughly twenty minute rest, half the students continued further up the hill, using the asphalt road at this point, to the upper Whitney Campground and Whitney Portal at 8,300 feet – many of them lured by the unlocked toilets to be found at the Portal. This brief section was on an asphalt road (the road having been closed for the winter season with a gate far down in the valley), and while we walked it we encountered a pair of Mercedes and a whole gaggle of Hollywood types out to shoot a car commercial. When they told me the theme of the commercial was a family "Through Life Together" I pointed out that we had some very photogenic kids but they politely declined. At Whitney Portal the majority of the students turned around and a group of eight students continued up the Whitney Trail (if you are following, the trail names change slightly, from *Whitney Portal National Recreational Trail* to *Whitney Trail*). The trail became significantly steeper, dominated by switchbacks, and with gorgeous views offered by the sweeping exposure. We crossed a creek twice and snow became more plentiful. We continued until we reached the edge of the snowfields where we began "posting" (sinking deep to our knees and thighs in snow) and called it quits when Steveo's altimeter registered 9,504 feet. At this point we had been walking uphill for almost 5 hours. After a well deserved chocolate break, we turned around and headed back down the "hill" with a spring in our step. It was clear we would be arriving late in camp so Steveo radioed ahead for the others (already back in camp) to go ahead and have dinner ahead of us (dinner this night being pizza/Mexican food in Lone Pine). Our group returned to camp shortly after nightfall. The light faded from the sky just as we descended the last foothill into the relative flat of Owen's Valley and we switched our headlamps on for the last 20 minutes of our walk, making for a very picturesque and dramatic return to camp in a single file of bobbing headlamps. It was a late dinner for this group (though we had the advantage of being steered away from the less than quality pizza place towards a slightly better Mexican restaurant), but spirits were high and there was a lot of laughter right up to the point where we split up to brush teeth and duck into our tents.

Driving – Our long drives went safely, greatly aided by Steveo’s new device-friendly policies that allowed students to listen to music and read on Kindles. My van now knows Mina’s playlist forwards and backwards ☺ I tried playing some Jimmy Cliff but this was quickly outvoted... The weather was perfect and we had some stunning views along the way with a lot to see of our beautiful State as we made a long loop through and around the heart of California.

On the long drive there on Monday we climbed up into the Sierras past South Lake Tahoe, then down into the bleak but beautiful arid rain shadow of the Eastern Sierras, turning south on Highway 395. The landscape everywhere showed the results of *three years of drought*. We were treated to some spectacular views of the volcanic chain of craters that make up the Mono Basin and Long Valley Caldera, stretching from Mono Lake to Mammoth Lake. The view of Mono Lake, with the Sierras and a clear blue sky reflecting in the lake water, was one of the more breathtaking ones. Dropping out of the Mammoth Lake region we entered Owens Valley, that other worldly valley which feels like a narrow corridor bounded by the soaring Sierra’s on one side and the soaring White Mountains on the other. As we drove south the Sierras appeared to rise higher and higher to our right out of the valley floor, with sharp, snow covered peaks in crystal clear weather. As we approached Big Pine, the site of our dorms for the first two nights, students wanted to know if one of the snow capped peaks on view was Whitney. Mt Whitney was not yet in sight, but the peaks in view were stunning nonetheless, and the late afternoon air at 4,000 feet was noticeably thinner than San Mateo, making you feel like you were already part way up those towering peaks.



Sierras on view from Big Pine

On the long drive back on Friday, we headed south down 395 with the Sierras still on our right hand side but now appearing to shrink bit by bit, mile by mile.

The landscape slowly changed to include Joshua Trees/Yucas. About two hours into our journey the Sierras had been reduced to a shadow of their former selves and were now rolling brown hills. Here, with the hills now tamed, our route turned west to traverse the now docile range. On the other side we headed up the 15 and drove for hours along California’s agricultural heartland. Farmers dealing with the consequences of a punishing drought advertised their political views along the route for students to see. We headed west on Highway 152 and while the rolling hills of Pacheco State Park were vibrant and green, the San Luis Reservoir’s deeply exposed water line gave a graphic illustration of the drought.



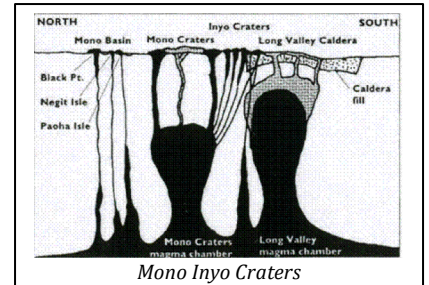
Pacheco State Park



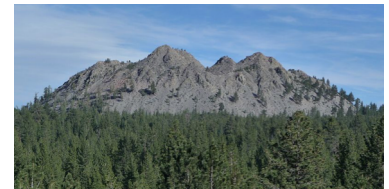
San Luis Reservoir



Mono Lake view from the road (395)



Mono Inyo Craters



Central Valley Farmers with the Drought on Their Mind