Bug road show thrills kids, recruits them to be ‘rain forest rangers’

Zette Ozaki is all eyes as a giant thorny phasmid struts a finger during the Insect Discovery Lab presentation at West school.

Getting creepy for a cause

By Glen Martin
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Giant millipedes, hissing cockroaches and whip scorpions may inspire fear and loathing in many adults, but kids find them enthralling, provided they are presented in an agreeable and non-threatening fashion.

So that’s what staffers at San Francisco’s Insect Discovery Lab do. During road shows to schools around the Bay Area, they like nothing more than to provide plaid — if exceedingly large — bugs for young students to cosset and pet.

In making kids understand that such critters are essentially harmless and interesting, the lab’s docents pass on a larger lesson: Arthropods — insects, spiders, millipedes, and the like — are essential to any ecological system, and they deserve our protection as much as snow leopards and spotted owls.

The lab is a project of the Center for Ecosystem Survival, a San Francisco group that has saved about 11 million acres of tropical rain forests and coral reefs since its founding in 1989.

Norman Gershzenz, executive director for the center, says the lab helps kids understand the dynamics of conservation by giving them hands-on experience with some of the rain forest’s most charismatic denizens.

“Kids are born naturalists,” said Gershzenz, as he gently handled a 6-inch-long walking stick from Malaysia known as a giant thorny phasmid. “When we show them these creatures, when we let them handle them, they get tremendously excited — not just about the animals themselves, but about the places where they live, and the necessity of saving them.”
Bugs bring rain forest to schoolkids

State University — provides tips on local insect conservation measures. Foremost among these is "butterfly gardening" — cultivating plants in backyard gardens agreeable to native butterflies and their larvae.

Studiers also pitch the center's Adopt An Acme and Adopt A Reef programs to the kids. Through these, students become "rain forest rangers" by participating in class activities that raise money to be used for purchasing critical forest and reef habitat in the Caribbe-an, Latin America and Micronesia.

"We could tell them to just go out and sell chocolate bars, but it's much more rewarding experience for them if they come up with their own ideas," Gershzen said. "First- and second-grade kids at a school in upstate New York raised $2,000 by selling nesting boxes for eastern bluebirds. And a couple of schools in San Francisco and Marin raised a lot of money by selling refrigerator magnets printed with pictures of the kids' rain forest species."

At a recent presentation for second-graders at Japanese Bilingual-Bicultural Program West in San Francisco's Sunset District, Gershzen brought out a number of prime specimens for the kids to examine, including eastern lubber grasshoppers — big, exotically colored bugs from Florida's Everglades.

"See how many colors you can count on them?" Gershzen asked the students. The bold hues are a warning to potential predators that the lubber is unappetizing, he explained.

Gershzen took out one of the giant millipedes and handed it around.

"When it moves, it's going to feel like a toothbrush," Gershzen said.

Some of the students were eager to handle the arthropods; others were hesitant. But all seemed mesmerized by the critters.

"They were awesome," one kid enthused. "Now I can tell my grandmother what grasshoppers are good."

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The Malaysian walking stick, or giant thorny phasmid, is found in the Cameron Highlands of the Malay Peninsula.

The Eastern lubber grasshopper, seen here in adult form, is limited to the southeastern and south-central United States.

An African millipede curls up in the hand of Norman Gershzen, executive director of the Center for Ecosystem Survival.