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# The San Diego Union-Tribune.

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## Children will lead the charge to clean up Swan Canyon

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By Shauntel Low  
May 1, 2008

**CITY HEIGHTS** – More than 1,000 mostly young volunteers are expected to descend into Swan Canyon on Saturday in an effort to clean up the wetland that neighbors say has become a valley of illegal activity and litter.

The cleanup, Wetland Avengers/Campeones de los Cañones 2008, is an annual event organized by Aquatic Adventures, a nonprofit organization that provides tuition-free classes and programs about marine science to underprivileged students.

Founded in 1999 by executive director Shara Fisler and funded by community, foundation and corporate donations, Aquatic Adventures reaches out to an average of 5,000 students each year with the goal of increasing the diversity in the scientific career field.

“For the health of our future, that's going to be really important to make sure it reflects our community as a whole,” Fisler said.

The cleanup is the culmination of a year's worth of intensive after-school classes that give urban youth the chance to have “real authentic experience” with marine biology that they may not otherwise receive, Fisler said.

Aquatic Adventures partnered with several organizations, including the San Diego Park and Recreation Department's Open Space Division and the Sierra Club's San Diego Canyons Campaign, to organize the cleanup. Swan Canyon, which borders Hamilton Elementary School, was selected this year's cleanup site because “it was in great need,” Fisler said.

### Swan Canyon Cleanup

**When:** 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Swan Canyon, next to Hamilton Elementary School, 2807 Fairmont Avenue, City Heights

**Information:** [aquaticadventures.org](http://aquaticadventures.org)

“The idea for the community is really taking back Swan Canyon and making it a safe, healthy, natural place that kids can really enjoy on a regular basis and connect with nature in their own neighborhood,” she said.

Valentina Hernandez, vice president of the North Swan Canyon Neighborhood Association, another event partner, said the canyon that is less than 1,000 feet from her home is a dwelling for more than just wildlife.

“One of my concerns is that we need to empower the community so that we can take back the canyon instead of letting the homeless, the drug dealers, the gangs, the others basically roam around,” Hernandez said.

Hernandez, mother of three young children and a member of the City Heights Area Planning Committee, said homeless people are constantly around her house and many people dump trash into the canyon.

In addition, the canyon is being overtaken by the thick, non-native arundo plant that shields illegal activity, she said.

Fisler said volunteers have already begun clearing some of the bamboolike arundo. They are expected to plant 3,500 native-species plants Saturday.

Volunteers will gather at Hamilton Elementary, where they will be fitted with gloves and hats. They also will be prepped on safety measures, organizers said.

One cleanup leader will be Jennifer Best, a junior marine biology student at San Diego State University and former Aquatic Adventures student.

“I've basically grown up in City Heights and seen how it's changed, and it makes me really happy people are taking an interest in things like this, going green,” Best said.

A classroom presentation by Fisler when Best was a 10th-grader at Hoover High School enticed Best to join the organization's BAHIA program, which brings students to an ecological preserve in Baja California to study marine life.

“It didn't feel like something I would do, (but) something inside me told me to go forward,” Best said. Since then, she has participated in several cleanups and currently works part time for the organization.

Fisler said bringing past participants into the organization helps with their goal of increasing diversity. “The best way we've been able to reflect the population is hiring our alumni,” she said.

Fisler said Saturday's event will give students the chance to practice what they've learned in all of their classes and programs, including a recent exhibition at EarthFair in Balboa Park.

“We are thrilled that we could have it after Earth Day. This provides a great opportunity to translate awareness into action,” Fisler said.

Best said she enjoys going to the cleanups.

“Past cleanups have been really special because you feel like you're doing something special for the environment. It's all of us getting together. It's a really good time,” she said.

Past sites have included Ocean Beach and Border Field State Park/Playas de Tijuana.

Fisler said she hopes the canyon can be reclaimed as a place for neighborhood children to play in the future.

“We'd really like to see as many volunteers as possible to be on site so they can learn about and work together to restore this habitat,” she said.

Shauntel Lowe is a freelance writer in San Diego.