Ah, spring break—that time when students and faculty usually enjoy a week away from their studies and their teaching. However, sometimes the enjoyment of spring break can be combined with studies and learning in a way that is both rewarding and fun. This year, 12 students, along with Professor Leon Malan and myself, traveled to Arizona to combine academic growth with a spring break adventure. During the last week in March, we camped in Catalina State Park outside Tucson, immersed in the desert we had studied about all semester in our classroom in Colgate Hall. Our students were young men and women representing a variety of majors. The course, “Desert Communities,” was cross-listed as both a Community and Environmental Studies (CES) course and a Biology course, and most of the trip’s participants were either majors or minors in those areas. There were, however, a couple of students who chose the course as an elective because they were intrigued by the subject and by the opportunity to participate in a field-study trip. One of those students was senior Chris Landon ’02, a Communications Studies major, who produced an excellent documentary film of the trip as his senior capstone project in communications.

Our classroom time began in January, and once a week for two hours we came together to discuss readings about how deserts are formed geologically, about climate, how organisms adapt to desert environments, how humans influence change in the area, and about the pressures and threats facing the region. In addition to assigned readings and lectures, each student researched a particular topic in depth to be presented during our time in Arizona. This approach was one of the ways this class differed from the classroom experience to which these students were accustomed. As Professor Malan explains, “We
engaged the students actively in their learning by asking them to become experts in an area and then to teach their peers about it.”

We left Colby-Sawyer at 5:45 a.m. on Saturday, March 23, which was our first challenge, since most students don’t regularly get up that early—especially not during spring break. It was approximately 25° F when we left campus, and the 14 of us were eager to get to warmer weather. By the time we left the Phoenix airport later that day, we had donned our shorts and t-shirts. In a 15-passenger van we drove to Catalina State Park, just outside Tucson, to the small, group camping area that was to be our home for the week. We watched the sun sink on the horizon as we set up our tents.

At 4:30 a.m. on our first morning in the desert, I awoke to a pack of coyotes yipping and howling as they made their way through the campground. I couldn’t help but think, “I hope the students hear this.” Sure enough, several of them reported hearing the howls and their eyes were wide as we confirmed that the animals were coyotes.

After breakfast the first day we visited Biosphere 2, site of the well-known experiment undertaken in the late 1980s, which attempted to replicate earth’s biomes under a giant greenhouse built for human habitation. Many people are aware of this study, which piqued curiosity and speculation at the time because reports were unclear about the purpose of the project and about its success or failure. We toured the facility, and then two students gave their presentations—Jon Evans ’04 (CES) taught us about desert weather and climate and Matt Timmons ’03 (CES) gave us the history of the Biosphere 2 project.

The second day we hiked from our campsite through the vegetation changes that occurred as we rose in elevation from the desert floor. Tamsen Bolte ’04 (CES) taught us about water issues in the desert, Jon DeYoung ’04 (CES) covered animal adaptations, and Geri Matyiko ’03 (Early Childhood Development) explained some of the interesting plants that are specially adapted to life in the Sonoran Desert. This day became one of the most meaningful of the trip for me as I watched our students demonstrate their capacity for caring and stewardship for this place they had just recently come to know.

That morning on the trail we encountered many local high school students who were hiking to Romero Pools for their Senior Skip Day. Their shrieks of excitement and laughter indicated they were having a good time, but later, when we returned to the area, we discovered they had left behind a lot of trash—both on the rocks and in the water. Without hesitation, our group decided to clean up the debris. Using our empty lunch bags, we picked up broken bottles, discarded clothing and toys, paper food wrappers, and other debris. A small group of local residents, observing us from above, was pleasantly surprised we did this even though we were “just visitors.” From Professor Malan’s and my perspective, this incident dovetailed nicely with Bill Doenges’s ’03 (CES) presentation that evening on the pressures that state parks place on fragile ecosystems.

In the following days Lindsay Micarelli ’03 (CES) taught us about mining in the desert and Graham White ’02 (Liberal Arts Associate) taught us about the Hohokam Native American culture and how the members of that tribe adapted their lifestyle to desert conditions. Jenni Beaulieu ’05 (CES) took us for a walk and helped us identify birds we encountered that week, including the threatened Pigmy Owl and the Road Runner of cartoon fame. Sitting in a dry riverbed in the cool shadows of a lichen-covered cliff, Becca Harned ’04 (Biology) helped us contemplate the evolutionary symbiotic development of desert species, and Chris Landon taught us about ranching pressures and the Bureau of Land Management. Morgan Jenkins ’03 (CES), through an
innovative exercise involving group work and Lego blocks, made us appreciate how difficult the task of planning for growth in a community can be. Following Morgan’s exercise, we met with the town planner for Oro Valley, where Catalina State Park is located, a meeting that left our students feeling that balancing municipal funding, development, and conservation was a complex and problematic assignment.

Our students were challenged by this course in the desert. Many of them reported learning a great deal in a unique and memorable way because they were able to see clearly the links between textbook concepts and the reality in the environment. As Jon Evans ’04 (CES) explained, “I did my paper on climate, so I knew it would be cold, but I guess it didn’t dawn on me how cold 40° is until you’re sleeping outside.” In addition to the scientific principles, students learned cooperation in planning food supplies, teamwork in making meals and cleaning up together, as well as living together in tents, on the trail, and in the van. They made new friends and became better friends; they watched out for each other, helped each other, and formed bonds that only traveling together can create. We returned exhausted and elated, and a little bit sunburned, savoring our memories. One of the highlights following our return was the viewing of Chris Landon’s completed documentary, and we each were given a copy of it as a keepsake. Chris did an amazing job of capturing the trip’s essence, and his documentary can be viewed on the Colby-Sawyer web site at: www.colby-sawyer.edu/academic/ces/index.html. Once you’ve watched it, I’m guessing you’ll wish you’d been with us.

Laura Alexander is an adjunct instructor in the Community and Environmental Studies major, an avid and expert outdoorswoman, and a terrific person to go with on any type of trek anywhere in New Hampshire, be it rock climbing or simply a nature walk.