TAHOE

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Deep learning

Tahoe Science Center

The Tahoe Science Center, located on the Sierra Nevada College campus in Incline Village, is a small space packed with a ton of information about the very big lake for which it's named. It's a part of the U.C. Davis Tahoe Environmental Research Center, where scientists work to understand and preserve the lake. Guided tours are available year-round, Tuesday through Friday from I to 5 p.m., and on Saturdays between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

According to Heather Segale, the center's education and outreach director, the space is meant to be a visitors' center and a learning experience, best for adults and kids 8 years old and up. Its displays cover studies and lake preservation initiatives being conducted by researchers in fields ranging from biology to climatology and geology.

Tours of the center start in the lobby, where a large map of the lake and surrounding terrain is mounted to a wall.

"We talk about the unique things about Lake Tahoe," Segale said. "One of the things people generally know about Lake Tahoe is that's it's so blue. And the reason that it's so blue has to do with the properties of light and the way the blue color is reflected back to your eye when a lake is very deep and clear, which Tahoe is.

"That's really one of the reasons Lake Tahoe has stayed so clear and pure," Segale said. "The size of the watershed is really small in comparison to the water body."

In comparison, consider the Mississippi River's broad watershed that flows across wide sections of the country, picking up eroded mattter along the way. Tahoe's Visitors to the center play with a display that lets them create a virtual watershed using a sandbox, a 3-D camera and a projector. PHOTO/JERI CHADWELL

watershed is small, so it picks up less. Plus, Segale said, in "the Tahoe Basin—the soils are mostly granitic, and they're low in nutrients, so we don't get a lot of erosion."

The center also has hands-on activities. Touch screen pads allow visitors to visualize and manipulate a digital lake to show how its water temperature will vary depending on its depth and the climate of the region in which it lies.

Segale explained, "If you have a very shallow lake, when it's cold, the whole lake, in a Mediterranean climate, can become one temperature. In a temperate climate, if it gets cold, it can freeze. ... We're basically in a Mediterranean climate, meaning that it generally doesn't get really, really cold here—although it can. And it's a deep lake, so, even in the coldest winter, it only gets the same temperature top to bottom. It never freezes."

Another display can be used to build a miniature watershed. It's basically an interactive sandbox. Visitors shape a watershed and lake basin in the box while a 3-D camera and digital projector anchored above them creates a virtual topographic map in real time. After shaping the basin, the user can create virtual rain and watch where it flows by waving his or hand between the projector and the sandbox.

The goal of all of these displays is more than simple fun, or even learning. According to Segale, the hope is that visitors to the center will afterward be mindful of how their own behaviors affect the lake—and maybe even engage in a bit of work themselves, using the Citizen Science Tahoe mobile app to document and report things ranging from litter to algae growth.

"People can learn ... and then also give us data, which is fantastic," Segale said. \Box

Learn more about the Tahoe Science Center here: tahoe. ucdavis.edu/tahoesciencecenter.

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