



**WILDERNESS
INQUIRY**

Connecting Youth to Minnesota's Cultural & Outdoor Heritage



Youth participants paddle and explore on the Mississippi River.



ARTS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE FUND
Legacy Amendment 2022 Annual Report
M.L. 2021, 1st Special Session, Ch. 1, Art. 4, Sect. 2, Subd. 6
Report Date January 15, 2023



PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Wilderness Inquiry's award-winning Canoemobile program engages students in high-quality, in-person and virtual place-based learning experiences focused on the rich cultural and natural heritage of Minnesota. Delivering standards-based and hands-on content and developed in collaboration with the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and other partners, Canoemobile program content is tied to Minnesota state standards to seamlessly integrate into school curriculum. Canoemobile features educational and experiential outdoor trips with land and water activities ranging from local history, water quality science, macroinvertebrate science, fire building, teambuilding, canoeing, and other natural and cultural histories and sciences unique to Minnesota while also building skills in camping, fishing, hiking, species identification, animal adaptations, and orienteering. In addition to in-person programming, Canoemobile also provides virtual learning sessions which include a physical activity kit with materials and tools for active participation and experiential engagement. Activity kit contents encourage participants to take what they learned through the virtual program outdoors, bringing to life on-screen learning. These hybrid programs are accessible for youth from across the state, reduce barriers to participation, reach a diverse array of participants, and support students with diverse learning styles. Virtual programs strengthen in-person experiences by engaging students and families before and after the in-person Canoemobile program, leading to deeper impact.

Now more than ever, engagement with the natural world is crucial to the health and well-being of our communities and Minnesota's outdoor heritage. According to a recent report by the Outdoor Foundation, only 18% of adults and children get outside at least once per week, and children in the U.S. spend an average of only 4-7 minutes playing outside per day. By combining opportunities for meaningful outdoor engagement with connection to a community of learners and explorers, Canoemobile programs help reduce social isolation, increase stewardship in the outdoors, and invest in the academic and social-emotional success of Minnesota youth. Through partnerships with state and federal agencies, Minnesota tribes, school districts, educators, and families, this project promotes equity and inclusion in the outdoors while engaging young learners with Minnesota's history and cultural heritage. For many participants, Canoemobile provides a foundation that gives students their first immersive experience in the outdoors. Our youth programs have been shown to increase student confidence, improve persistence and grit, inspire interest in outdoors-related careers, and cultivate a stewardship ethic.

Fellows through a partnership with Friends of the Mississippi River explore outdoor career options in the Twin Cities and along the Mississippi River.





WILDERNESS INQUIRY

GRANTEE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Ed Spencer	John Grady	Mikisha Nation
Beth Finch	Mary Hanley	Dotun Obadina
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Paul Fischer	Louis Lambert	Jaime Stilson
Laura Forero	Dan Moreno	

GRANTEE

WILDERNESS INQUIRY
 1611 County Rd B W Suite 315
 Saint Paul, MN 55113

PROJECT APPROPRIATION

Through the generous support of the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, \$776,000 over two fiscal years (FY22 & FY23) was appropriated to Wilderness Inquiry to connect youth to Minnesota’s cultural and outdoor heritage. For the 2022 fiscal year, Wilderness Inquiry received \$388,000 and allocated \$227,013.54 to direct project expenses. In addition, in July and August 2021, Wilderness Inquiry allocated \$93,262.50 of \$363,750 total funds allocated from fiscal year 2021. There were no administrative expenses allocated to either project.

ADDITIONAL FUNDING & LEVERAGE

This project has leveraged additional funding from private sources including: H.B. Fuller, the Mortenson Family Foundation, Nature Valley, Otto Bremer Trust, RBC Wealth Management, the Saint Paul and Minnesota Foundation, Thomson Reuters, Winnebago Industries, and additional corporate, foundation, and individual support.

DURATION OF PROJECT

2020 Appropriation: July 1, 2020 - August 31, 2021
 2022 Appropriation: September 1, 2021 - June 30, 2023

NUMBER OF FULL-TIME EQUIVALENTS FUNDED

4.1 (FY21) / 3.25 (FY22)

CANOEMOBILE WEBSITE

www.canoemobile.org/programs/canoemobile/program-overview



First time paddler learns boating safety as she prepares to paddle on a lake close to home.

PROPOSED MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

- **11,000 youth across the state will connect to Minnesota's outdoor heritage through place-based education. These youth will:**
 - Show increased motivation to explore, enjoy and support local, state, and federal public lands
 - Receive educational content and credit that meets Minnesota state history standards
 - Have a greater understanding of educational, recreational, and career opportunities across the outdoor sector
- **Expanded partnerships for Minnesota school districts, teachers, and youth serving organizations.**
 - Through these partnerships and delivering place-based education we expect positive outcomes in social emotional growth.



Welcoming Canoemobile for the first time, youth from Eagan paddle on Blackhawk Lake.



MOST OF MEASURABLE OUTCOMES ACHIEVED IN FY22

Wilderness Inquiry achieved all measurable outcomes for the 2020 appropriation.

For the 2022 appropriation, Wilderness Inquiry has served:

4,847

Participants were served through place-based, hands-on, in-person programming in FY22.

1,378

Minnesota students participated in live virtual experiences focused on Minnesota's cultural and outdoor heritage.

6,225

Total Participants



Students return from a paddle on the Cedar River in Mower County.



Edison High School students connect to each other and the outdoors at French Park.



Fellows learn historical and cultural significance of native plants along the Mississippi River.



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MOST OF MEASURABLE OUTCOMES ACHIEVED IN FY22

4,847

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Beginning in September, 2021, Canoemobile programming toured the state of Minnesota offering in-person learning experiences on local lands and waterways. From the Mississippi River in Minneapolis/St Paul, to the Cedar River in Mower County, to Serpent Lake in the Brainerd area, Canoemobile engaged participants in canoeing, cultural history, science, and outdoor recreation activities such as fire building and team building. In winter, students experienced the outdoors on snowshoes, around ice-fishing holes, and overnight in winter cabins, learning about the rich natural and cultural histories of Minnesota in winter. As rivers and lakes thawed in spring, Canoemobile was back on the water engaging learners across the Twin Cities Metro and Fairmont, gearing up for another fall of Greater Minnesota programs.

1,378

Minnesota students participated in live virtual experiences focused on Minnesota's cultural and outdoor heritage.

Created during a time when the safety and health of participants and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic was paramount, Canoemobile's virtual programming allowed Minnesota youth to engage in new, creative, and accessible ways. Due to the virtual programming success, Virtual Explorers programs continued to serve participants throughout FY22.

Participation in virtual programming for Minnesota youth is fully funded by the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund. Through these programs, students participate in live, virtual, place-based educational content focused on science, social studies, and the cultural and outdoor heritage of Minnesota. Collaboratively planned and led by Wilderness Inquiry staff and National Park Service rangers, students are given an opportunity to engage with peers and adult educators safely from their own homes or classrooms, supporting academic and socio-emotional engagement and development.

To learn more about Wilderness Inquiry's Virtual Explorers opportunities for Minnesota youth, visit our website: <https://www.wildernessinquiry.org/virtual-explorers-for-youth>



Positive outcomes in public land engagement, education, career interest, and social emotional learning

In 2022, participants completed an evaluation through Hello Insight to better assess the social and emotional learning (SEL) growth of youth participants. SEL is a process through which children and young adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. The Hello Insight results are focused on SEL outcomes which, paired with qualitative historical evaluation results of Wilderness Inquiry programs, show positive impacts in persistence, environmental stewardship, and interest in careers. Growth in these interest areas effectively increases connection to public lands and green spaces, and awareness of opportunities to pursue deepened educational, recreational, and career engagement throughout the outdoor field.

Wilderness Inquiry programming fosters outdoor exploration, another SEL process that involves promoting interest in the natural environment and exploring the relationship with other living and nonliving things. This experience has been shown to increase young people's healthy habits, such as physical activity, and in the long-term, indicators of wellness like better concentration and a greater sense of freedom. Exposure to nearby nature on Wilderness Inquiry trips, such as public lands close to home, provides young people the opportunity to explore and enjoy their public lands while feeling safe and supported in the experience.

"Thank you for teaching me how to make fire and how to build a shelter, now I know how to build a shelter and fire when I am lost in the wild."

– Youth participant from Prairie Seeds Academy special education class

In partnership with Mississippi Watershed Management Organization, youth explore their local section of the Mississippi River.



Minnesota state history content and alignment to academic standards exists throughout Wilderness Inquiry youth programming, with special focus in the Virtual Explorers program where culturally significant and sensitive sites, like The Bdote, are featured. To see specific academic standards alignment, please visit our website: www.wildernessinquiry.org/itinerary/mississippi-river-explorers-virtual-summer-camp

Young people participating in Wilderness Inquiry programming gain 21st-century skills (problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, self-management) and develop social and emotional capacities that correlate with long-term gains in high school completion, college/career readiness, and increased life-long thriving. There is a growing body of evidence showing that SEL qualities match academic or technical skills in their ability to predict employment and earnings, among other outcomes. Wilderness Inquiry's programming introduces young people to educational, recreational, and career opportunities throughout the outdoor sector and reinforces aptitude through continued exposure to new learning experiences.

Specific SEL results administered with Hello Insight show that:

- 77% of MN High School participants surveyed agreed that Wilderness Inquiry's program leaders often expressed to young people that they expect them to try hard and do their best. This is a SEL best practice to promote resilience (Zhang, Y. et al., 2011).
- 75% of MN High School participants surveyed agreed that Wilderness Inquiry's program leaders frequently reminded young people that we believe in them and their ability to succeed. This is a SEL best practice to enhance academic performance (Steele, C.M. 2011).
- 72% of participants surveyed agreed that Wilderness Inquiry's program helped young people feel safe and supported by consistently and purposefully applying their recommendations. Empirical research shows that the number of hours young people spend in a program, or the number of activities they engage in, does not make a difference (Flores, K. 2018; Pekel, K. 2016; Pekel, K., et al 2015). Rather, it's positive, meaningful relationships with adults that really drive social and emotional learning.



A classroom participant in a virtual field trip.



In partnership with the National Park Service, students lay in the snow identifying trees at Fort Snelling State Park.



Young children connect to their local park.



Expanded partnerships for Minnesota school districts, teachers, and youth serving organizations

With continued growth in programming opportunities as communities re-engage with in-person learning, Canomobile expanded relationships with partners across the state of Minnesota. Some of these new and expanded partnerships include:

- **Deaf Equity** is an organization with a mission to empower the deaf community and remind them that they are not alone. Wilderness Inquiry supported a Fall Adventure through a fire-building station, teaching individuals who are Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing how to build a fire through multiple means. This partnership development has generated future programmatic planning opportunities for 2023 and beyond.
- **Friends of the Mississippi River** fellows joined Wilderness Inquiry Outdoor Leaders and National Park Service rangers on the Mississippi River to learn about different career opportunities in the Twin Cities outdoor education and recreation fields, and have fun bonding as a cohort.
- **Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance** works within communities to raise awareness about the changing Lake Pepin environment. In May 2022, Wilderness Inquiry explored a new portion of the Mississippi River with Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance and 4H high school youth and community members. With the support of Wilderness Inquiry adaptive equipment and trained Outdoor Leaders, participants experiencing disability, including a student with a limb deficiency, were all able to safely participate.

In addition to new partnerships, Legacy funds continued to support existing relationships with school districts and organizations that support young people's connection to Minnesota heritage. Here are a few quotes from participants and group organizers that reflect their experiences with Canomobile:

"Thank you so so much! Students are still talking about it! Your staff were awesome with the students - wopila tanka, much gratitude!" – Jen Simon, Director of American Indian Education at Minneapolis Public Schools, after Canoe Nations Gathering at Bde Maka Ska

"I have now been working with WI for over a decade. The experience you all share with our students and families is truly life changing. You are such an amazing institution with our wonderful driving mission. Thank you and we look forward to continued partnership."
– Matt Ruzek, former Principal Riverside Central, Rochester Public Schools

THANK YOU!

Through the support of the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, Wilderness Inquiry is able to connect thousands of youth across the state to the rich culture and outdoor heritage that makes Minnesota unique.

Wilderness Inquiry and ACHF share a commitment to preserving Minnesota's outdoor heritage through hands-on education and programming, fostering student development as recreationalists and natural resource stewards. We thank you for the opportunity to bring Canoemobile to thousands of students across the state.

