



**WILDERNESS
INQUIRY**

Connecting Youth to Minnesota's Cultural & Outdoor Heritage



Youth participants paddle and explore on Glen Lake.



ARTS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE FUND

Legacy Amendment 2023 Annual Report

M.L. 2021, 1st Special Session, Ch. 1, Art. 4, Sect. 2, Subd. 6

Report Date January 15, 2024



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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Wilderness Inquiry 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, program content is tied to Minnesota state standards to seamlessly integrate into school curriculum. Wilderness Inquiry programs feature 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, Wilderness Inquiry 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 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, Wilderness Inquiry 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, Wilderness Inquiry 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.

Teen Ambassadors pose for a photo during their trip to Voyageurs National Park.





GRANTEE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Ed Spencer	Laura Forero	Dan Moreno
Beth Finch	John Grady	John Hinck
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Jaime Stilson	Mikisha Nation	Kelly Drummer
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GRANTEE

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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 2023 fiscal year, Wilderness Inquiry spent \$417,060.42, all of which was allocated to direct project expenses. There were no Wilderness Inquiry administrative expenses allocated to the project.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were delayed in starting this project until September 1, 2021 and did not draw down the entirety of the project funds by June 30, 2023. Wilderness Inquiry received an extension and completed the project and spent all funds as of September 15, 2023. We will report on the completion of the project in the FY24 annual report.

ADDITIONAL FUNDING & LEVERAGE

This project has leveraged additional funding from private sources including: H.B. Fuller, Mississippi Park Connection, 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

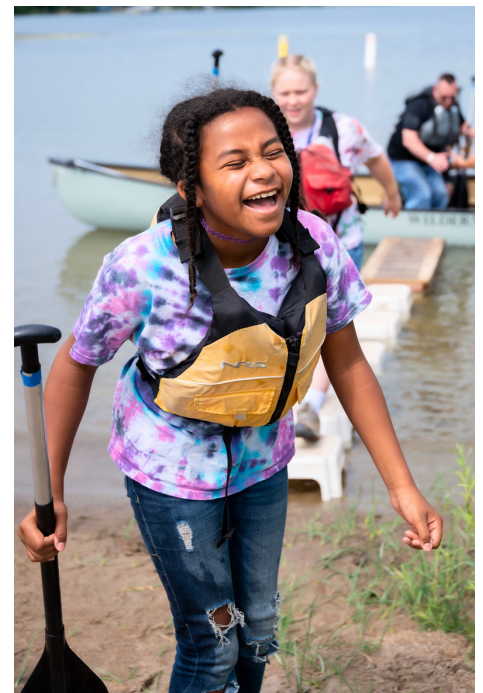
2022 Appropriation: September 1, 2021 - September 15, 2023

NUMBER OF FULL-TIME EQUIVALENTS FUNDED

3.25

ORGANIZATION WEBSITE

<https://www.wildernessinquiry.org>



Student reacts after paddling in a canoe for the first time.

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.



American Indian Education students learn about water quality testing.

MOST OF PROPOSED OUTCOMES ACHIEVED IN FY23

*Wilderness Inquiry achieved most of the proposed measurable outcomes for the project.
In total, Wilderness Inquiry has served 10,904 participants since the beginning of the project.*

For the 2023 appropriation, Wilderness Inquiry has served:

4,027

Participants were served through place-based, hands-on, in-person programming in FY23.

652

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

4,679

TOTAL PARTICIPANTS



High school students experience dogsledding in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area.



Gigi's Playhouse participants learn how to paddle and canoe in Minneapolis.



Students learn fire-building skills before making s'mores.



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MOST OF MEASURABLE OUTCOMES ACHIEVED IN FY23

4,027

Participants were served through place-based, hands-on, in-person programming in FY23.

Wilderness Inquiry programs teach Minnesota history and culture while building skills in camping, fishing, canoeing, hiking, fire building, species identification, animal adaptations, and orienteering. Our programs engaged participants across the state of Minnesota offering place-based, outdoor education on local lands and waterways from Rainy Lake in International Falls to Trout Lake near Grand Rapids to Lake Crystal in Madelia. Twin Cities metro programming locations included Lake Phalen Regional Park, Battle Creek Park, Theodore Wirth Park, and the Mississippi River corridor between Coon Rapids and Hastings. 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.

652

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

Wilderness Inquiry's virtual programming allows Minnesota youth to engage in new, creative, and accessible ways that remain in demand beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. By providing virtual instruction, Wilderness Inquiry delivers hands-on educational experiences in the outdoors that tie to classroom learning and enhance the distance-learning experience.

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 socioemotional engagement and development.

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



Participants gain motivation to explore and enjoy public lands, academic educational content alignment, and understanding of opportunities across the outdoor sector

Wilderness Inquiry uses Hello Insight to evaluate 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 motivation to explore, enjoy and support local, state and federal public lands and lead to a greater understanding of educational, recreational, and career opportunities across the outdoor sector.

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.

***"80% of students on this trip have never canoed before.
They were safe, well cared for, and students wanted to canoe again!"***

– Jim Glaser, St. Paul Music Academy

Participants from Park Center High School explore the beauty of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in winter.





Wilderness Inquiry partnerships with organizations and agencies in the outdoor sector benefit participants. As part of Wilderness Inquiry programming, students experience Outdoor Career Spotlights where during the lunch break of the paddle trip they are joined by an NPS or DNR ranger or another individual in the outdoor profession who shares their professional background and more about how young people can get involved in the outdoor sector. Students also have the opportunity to learn from Wilderness Inquiry Outdoor Leaders and Fellows who are trained to share about their pathway into the profession.

Youth participating in Wilderness Inquiry programs receive educational content and credit that meets Minnesota state history standards. Minnesota state 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: <https://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:

- 79% of MN participants surveyed agreed feeling that their physical and mental wellness is enhanced by being in nature or the outdoors as a result of this programming.
- 76% of MN participants surveyed demonstrated an increase in their interest in environmental problems and their desire to be part of the solution as a result of this programming.
- 71% of MN participants surveyed demonstrated an increased connection to the outdoors as a result of this programming.



Tickets for Kids participant catches a fish in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area.



In partnership with the DNR, students learn about wildlife at Fort Snelling State Park.



Students paddle on Lake Phalen.



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:

- **Inver Grove Heights** district middle school participated in two days of Mississippi River Virtual Explorers in preparation for an in-person Mississippi River canoe trip in August of 2022. Youth learned about the cultural significance of The Bdote (the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers) and the unique geological aspects of Saint Anthony Falls virtually before trading their tablets for paddles to experience the Mississippi River from the seat of a 24-foot North Canoe.
- **Park Center High School's** Outdoor Recreation classes in the Osseo School District participated in multiple outdoor learning experiences, including a School Site Activities Day where they learned the benefits of being outdoors, Leave No Trace principles, and water quality testing. The class canoed along the Mississippi River and learned about water quality and water management alongside rangers from the NPS-MNRRRA. These foundational experiences prepared them for extended camping trip experiences to Baker Near Wilderness Outdoor Learning Center and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. Due to the immense interest by students and impact of this partnership, the school district opened eight additional sections of Outdoor Recreation for 2023-24 school year.
- **Partnership between Wakan Tipi Awanyankapi** (formerly Lower Phalen Creek Project) and Wilderness Inquiry weaves together Indigenous ecological knowledge with Western scientific knowledge to bring a rich educational experience to Minnesota Native students. Interpretation is led by Wakan Tipi's staff while Wilderness Inquiry guides all of the participants on our 24-foot North Canoes to meet plant relatives along the restored shoreline, listen to stories passed down by elders, and learn key outdoor skills, such as nettle weaving or fire-building techniques. We served two American Indian Ed programs from Bloomington and Rosemount school districts with plans for further expansion.

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 Wilderness Inquiry:

"I had kids pounding on my office door this morning asking about the next trip and if we can do this again next year. Your staff and the Baker Park staff made the trip excellent. The snow was a welcome addition and the kids had a blast. At one point I had to tell the kids to get their phones out and take pictures, I normally have to fight with them to put their phones away!"

- Chris Gudvangen, Park Center High School Teacher (Osseo Area Public Schools)

"This was the first time many of our students had been canoeing. It was great for the students to experience something new and learn a new skill! We also appreciated the land acknowledgement, Ojibwe Anishinaabe students were in attendance at these events. Our school has cultural liaisons that integrate the Ojibwe language, culture, and history into the school day and out-of-school time, it was great to acknowledge this prior to starting the day's events."

- Kayla Meyer, Greenway Public School District

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 Wilderness Inquiry to thousands of students across the state.

