



Wilderness Inquiry envisions a day when every young person in Minnesota has the opportunity to access our public lands and waterways, connecting to our state's rich outdoor heritage.

Proposal

Wilderness Inquiry (WI) seeks funding from the Legacy Amendment, Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund to connect Minnesota youth to our state's cultural and outdoor heritage. Through inclusive and educational outdoor experiences that align with Minnesota graduation standards, WI reduces the opportunity gap by engaging students across the state from backgrounds underrepresented in outdoor-related activities (youth of color, low-income families, individuals with disabilities, and others). In Fiscal Years 2022-2023, Legacy funding will enable WI to:

- Connect 11,000 youth to Minnesota's outdoor heritage through place-based education that is delivered in a hybrid model to ensure safe participation across the state.
- Provide standards-based educational content through hands-on activities that engage students with Minnesota's outdoor heritage.
- Support the physical and mental wellbeing of Minnesota youth through immersive outdoor experiences.



Evidence shows that nature-based learning experiences contribute to student gains in social studies, math, and STEM/STEAM subjects. However, youth statewide face barriers to participation in such educational outdoor experiences. Since FY 2016, with support from the Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund, more than 17,000 youth have participated in WI's place-based education activities that connect to Minnesota's natural resources and cultural history. Due to COVID-19, Wilderness Inquiry shifted in 2020 to provide meaningful outdoor-based experiences through virtual platforms as well. In doing so, we discovered that this platform provides greater access for students from across the state to participate in this high-quality program. In FY 2022-2023, with Legacy support, Wilderness Inquiry proposes a hybrid model to continue engaging students in outdoor content virtually, as well as through meaningful in-person experiences in the outdoors. This program promotes learning and engagement, preserving Minnesota's rich historical and cultural heritage while reducing the opportunity gap for youth of color, low-income youth, and others who face barriers to outdoor participation.

\$400,000	FY 2022 Legacy Request	(5,500 students; averages \$73/student)
\$400,000	FY 2023 Legacy Request	(5,500 students; averages \$73/student)
\$800,000	FY 2022-2023 Legacy Request	(11,000 students; averages \$73/student)

Project Overview

Wilderness Inquiry will help foster future stewards of Minnesota's outdoor heritage by:

- **Engaging students in high-quality hybrid programs** – Wilderness Inquiry will provide cultural and historical content to students through live, interactive virtual programs in addition to hands-on, in-person experiences. By making these hybrid programs accessible for youth from across the state, we reduce barriers to participation, reach a diverse array of participants, and support students with diverse learning styles. Virtual programs strengthen our in-person experiences by allowing us to engage students and families before and after the on-water Canoemobile program, leading to deeper engagement and impact.
- **Delivering standards-based and hands-on content** – Developed in collaboration with the National Park Service and others, program content is tied to Minnesota state standards and integrates into school curriculum. In addition, even virtual sessions include a hands-on kit with materials and tools for active participation and experiential engagement.



- **Expanding access to the outdoors statewide** – 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. Considering this, outdoor experiences have become more important than ever. This program combines opportunities for meaningful outdoor engagement with connection to a community of learners and explorers, reducing social isolation, increasing stewardship in the outdoors, and investing 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 will promote equity and inclusion in the outdoors while engaging young learners with Minnesota’s history and cultural heritage.



Specific project activities teach Minnesota history and culture while building skills in camping, fishing, canoeing, hiking, fire building, species identification, animal adaptations, and orienteering. By providing virtual instruction as well, WI delivers hands-on educational experiences in the outdoors that tie to classroom learning and enhance the distance-learning experience. For many participants, WI 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.

Impact

- » Preserve Minnesota’s outdoor history and cultural heritage by reconnecting youth to our natural resources.
- » Motivate Minnesota youth to explore, enjoy, and support local, state, and federal public lands.
- » Reduce the opportunity gap – 59% of youth participants identify as a person of color, 12% identify as a person with a disability, and 61% are financially disadvantaged.
- » Teach Minnesota state history standards through hands-on outdoor and virtual learning opportunities.
- » Connect youth to educational, recreational, and career opportunities across the outdoor sector.
- » Streamline partnerships with multiple Minnesota school districts to boost academic achievement through the educational, social, and emotional benefits of place-based education.
- » Engage students from across the state by offering a variety of ways to participate, including a hybrid option.

Background

Since 1978, Wilderness Inquiry has directly served 500,000+ people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities through inclusive outdoor experiences that connect people to each other and the natural world. In 2008, WI, the National Park Service, and other public and private entities, established Canoemobile – a collaborative outdoor youth engagement program that serves 18,000+ Minnesota students annually. Support from the Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund, along with extensive funding from the private, corporate, and foundation sectors, allows WI to provide high-quality, place-based education opportunities that are adherent to state history standards.

Research and evaluation outcomes demonstrate that WI programming leads to academic success, socio-emotional growth, and improved relationships. 92% of teachers surveyed believe the outdoor experience supported academic learning, and 85% of students are likely to try a new outdoor activity after participating in WI programming.

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1 American Institutes for Research (2005). Effects of Outdoor Education Programs for Children in California.

2 Fields, et. al. (2020). Wilderness Inquiry Evaluation Brief: 2019 Minnesota Floating Classrooms. University of Minnesota Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI).

3 Sheldon, T.D. (2014). Urban Wilderness Canoe Adventures Program Brief Evaluation Report. University of Minnesota Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI).