



Connecting Youth, Adults, and Families to Minnesota's Cultural and Outdoor Heritage

Wilderness Inquiry envisions a day when every Minnesotan has the opportunity to access our state's lands and waters and connect to our rich outdoor heritage.

For 47 years, Wilderness Inquiry has connected people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities through shared outdoor adventures so that all people can experience the benefits of time spent in nature. Our programs serve more than 15,000 Minnesotans annually in communities throughout the state, highlighting our rich culture and natural resources through place-based education. We offer a progression of outdoor experiences that build confidence, connection, persistence, and stewardship ethics in young people.

Canoemobile

Wilderness Inquiry's "floating classroom," Canoemobile, brings outdoor learning to life through place-based educational programs on waterways and public lands across Minnesota. In each community, we work with local partners to conduct immersive, nature-based educational activities that include canoeing, fishing, history of place, and outdoor education activities, and provide an introduction to local resources for future participation in the outdoors. Canoemobile programming supports students to improve school performance, cultivate a stewardship ethic, and learn about Minnesota history and culture, and creates pathways for youth to pursue educational and career opportunities in the outdoors.

Pyramid of Outdoor Engagement

The Pyramid of Outdoor Engagement provides a progression of outdoor experiences designed to engage participants in a life-long relationship with the outdoors. We welcome participants of any age and at any level of outdoor experience, supporting individuals on their own journey into the outdoors. Adventures that follow this progression include:

- Introductory outdoor educational experiences for youth that align with state graduation standards and develop social and emotional learning capacities
- Near-nature experiences for families, community members, and multi-generational groups to explore Minnesota's outdoors close to home
- Immersive trips to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, Voyageurs National Park, state parks, and other natural areas
- Training and career pathways that provide opportunities for youth and young adults to build outdoor skills, attain credentials, and pursue professional opportunities in Minnesota's \$10+ billion outdoor recreation sector



Proposal and Impact

Wilderness Inquiry requests funding in FY26-27 from the Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund to:

- Connect 12,500 youth and families to Minnesota’s outdoor heritage through a progression of recreation and education programs that build confidence, connection, and interest in our state’s history and culture
- Expand statewide access and engagement in the outdoors (*Wilderness Inquiry programs will reach more than 40 Minnesota communities through this project*)
- Provide standards-based educational content through hands-on activities that teach Minnesota history and culture while building skills in camping, fishing, canoeing, hiking, fire building, species identification, and orienteering
- Provide training and career pathway opportunities that tie to outdoor careers and Minnesota’s outdoor heritage
- Partner with state and federal agencies, Minnesota tribes, school districts, educators, community leaders, and families to promote outdoor engagement, recreation, and education

Since FY16, with support from the Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund, more than 48,000 individuals have participated in Wilderness Inquiry’s educational and recreational programs that foster connections to Minnesota’s natural resources and cultural history.

Project Budget	\$675,000	FY26 Legacy Request (6,000 participants)
	\$729,000	FY27 Legacy Request (6,500 participants)
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	\$1,404,000	FY26-27 Legacy Request (12,500 participants; avg. \$112/participant)

Community Need

According to a report by the Outdoor Foundation, only 18% of adults and children get outside at least once per week. Additionally, children in the U.S. spend an average of only 4-7 minutes playing outside per day. Hundreds of research studies now demonstrate that outdoor learning improves student performance, increases participation in learning activities, strengthens attention, and positively impacts career motivation. For adults, nature provides a space for social connection, physical and mental health, and links to history and culture. Quality family experiences, like spending time in nature together, directly support positive youth development such as improved academic performance and increased graduation rates. For 80% of youth participants, Wilderness Inquiry provides their first organized nature-based experience in the outdoors.

This program is a great way for our students to explore a river that runs through our own backyard as it winds through our state and country. The programming offered is a high-quality experience for our students filled with meaningful content and active participation, and addresses cross-curricular standards. It provides a step out of our classroom. The presenters are great with our students, energetic, and knowledgeable in their field.”

— 5TH GRADE TEACHER

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