

Testimony of Greg Lais, Wilderness Inquiry
Federal Priorities for Fiscal Year 2021
Interior-Environment Appropriations Committee

February 24th, 2020

Congresswoman McCollum, members of the committee, my name is Greg Lais and I am here to speak on behalf of Wilderness Inquiry's Federal Priorities for fiscal year 2021.

I am sure it will be no surprise when I say we need funding to help provide access to Public Lands for underserved groups, especially youth and families. At Wilderness Inquiry, we learned years ago that if you are trying to engage people who know little about public lands and less about the outdoors there is only one effective strategy— go to them.

Don't expect them to come to you. Go to them where they live and engage them on their terms.

Forty years ago we gave slide-shows at nursing homes to recruit persons with disabilities to go to the Boundary Waters. Invariable they asked if they could try something a little closer to home first. So, we did many introductory canoe paddles at Lake Phalen, Como, Harriet, and other places.

Twelve years ago we started the Canoemobile program to engage 10,000 kids per year on the Mississippi River. That program grew rapidly and now serves more than 30,000 youth annually in 50 communities across the United States.

The Canoemobile is modeled after the Bookmobile program of old. If you recall, the Bookmobile's mission was to bring literacy to rural America. The Canoemobile's mission is to bring environmental literacy to urban America, especially youth and families, via those 24' Voyageur Canoes.

Our means is to work through school districts here in the Twin Cities and around the country as an extension of the classroom. Essentially, those big Voyageur canoes become floating classrooms, and we turn public lands and waterways into "smart boards" for active and engaged learning.

The Canoemobile is but one example of how to bring the outdoors to youth and families. Simply stated, we need to scale programs like Canoemobile so that we are reaching millions of youth in cities across the United States.

One of the most groundbreaking things we do is help students who are falling behind with academic credits—kids who are at the core of the Achievement Gap.

We've worked with Minneapolis Public Schools and the Minneapolis Foundation for 5-years now, to help students gain credits in math, science, language arts and more through a nature-based summer school program. The results have been

very encouraging. Not only are the students engaged in active learning, but they engage in public lands close to home.

We would like to see the Subcommittee on Interior and Environment continue to push these kinds of nature-based educational initiatives, at scale, with schools throughout the United States. Not only is nature-based learning an effective and engaging way to learn, it also brings the outdoors and public lands to kids where they live.

Finally, in addition to public schools, we also encourage continued work with youth serving organizations such as the Corp Network, Blue Star Military Families, Hands on the Land, and of course YMCA's across the country.

All of these organizations and more are eager to provide access to Public Lands for underserved youth and families.

Thank you!

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