**PROJECT TITLE:** Minnesota Freshwater Quest: Environmental Education on State Waterways

**I. PROJECT STATEMENT**

The Minnesota Freshwater Quest connects 30,000 diverse youth to Minnesota waterways across the state—using freshwater species as the hook for environmental education. More than the land of 10,000 lakes, Minnesota boasts 34,167 miles of rivers and streams and 28,176 different lakes, ponds, and wetlands. It is our collective responsibility to manage these waters. We need our next generation to protect our waters for generations to come—this begins with environmental and science education.

The Minnesota Freshwater Quest is a new project-based learning tool and framework connecting youth to information about threatened species and ecosystems throughout the state—guiding them on a “Quest” to discover and implement solutions to help in their local communities. The program is specifically tailored for Minnesota species and waterways. Through the Quest, students adopt a species, participate in hands-on environmental education on local waterways, collect and share water quality data through the worldwide database GLOBE (Global Learning and Observation to Benefit the Environment), and complete a student-led project to improve their ecosystem—enhancing the environment for their adopted species.

This project implements the MN Freshwater Quest for the first time in communities throughout the state to:

* Connect diverse and underserved students to outdoor experiences that increase environmental stewardship among the next generation.
* Improve water quality in lakes, rivers, and streams through education, data collection, and real-world projects implemented by youth.
* Integrate hands-on science and environmental education activities into classroom learning, with an opportunity to recover academic credits in select districts.

**II. PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES**

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| **Activity 1 Title:** 30,000 Minnesota Youth Experience and Improve their Watershed  **Description:**  A newly developed online platform, The Minnesota Freshwater Quest, delivers environmental education through classroom-based instruction and hands-on learning in the outdoors. The Quest is successful in engaging students in environmental education; however it has not yet been implemented throughout Minnesota. This project gives all districts the opportunity to participate in the Quest. Wilderness Inquiry will provide hands-on environmental education as part of the Quest to more than 30 school districts reaching all regions of the state—including Albert Lea, Brainerd, Fergus Falls, Grand Rapids, International Falls, Saint Cloud, Thief River Falls, and the Twin Cities.  As part of the Minnesota Freshwater Quest:   1. Teachers register their classroom at <https://herofortheplanet.org/mnwaterquest>. 2. Students enter their home zip code to learn about which species are imperiled in their local ecosystem, including amphibians, birds, dragonflies/damselflies, mussels, mammals, and reptiles. 3. Students “adopt” a species and learn about their watershed and what that species requires to thrive. 4. Students participate in an outdoor daylong environmental education experience to learn more about their species, collect water quality data, and analyze indicators of ecosystem health. *ENRTF funding allows 30,000 Minnesota youth to participate with Wilderness Inquiry.* 5. Students disseminate their water quality data through GLOBE—contributing to our understanding of the global environment. 6. Classrooms are encouraged to develop a project that improves the local watershed and positively impacts their chosen species. *A project partner, Captain Planet Foundation, provides mini-grants for these projects, with funding specifically for Minnesota schools.*   **ENRTF BUDGET: $1,432,110** |  |

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| **Outcome** | **Completion Date** |
| *1. Minnesota Freshwater Quest disseminated as an environmental learning tool to all 336 Minnesota school districts through directed outreaches*. *(Facilitated and Funded by Wilderness Inquiry In-Kind)* | *12/31/2020* |
| *2. 400 educators complete a Minnesota Freshwater Quest training to learn how to integrate the Quest into their existing school curriculum. (Facilitated by Wilderness Inquiry; Funded by ENRTF)* | *06/01/2022* |
| *3. 400 classrooms register for the Quest. (Facilitated by Wilderness Inquiry)* | *9/01/2022* |
| *4. 10 student-led watershed improvement projects completed based on discovery during the Quest. (Facilitated by Wilderness Inquiry; Funded by Captain Planet Foundation)* | *6/30/2023* |
| *5. 30,000 diverse youth experience environmental education along their local Minnesota waterways through activities such as collecting and disseminating water quality data, paddling in 24’ Voyageur canoes, and learning about their ecosystem by “adopting a species.” Water quality data is entered through the Freshwater Quest and disseminated through GLOBE. (Facilitated by Wilderness Inquiry; Funded by ENRTF) Approx. 375 events, average 80 youth each* | *6/30/2023* |

**III. PROJECT PARTNERS AND COLLABORATORS:**

This project represents a large-scale collaboration with Wilderness Inquiry as the lead organization, coordinating with multi-sector partners. Key partners include:

* Minnesota School Districts: In addition to sharing the online Quest with all school districts throughout the state, this project directly engages more than 30 school districts in hands-on outdoor learning.
* Captain Planet Foundation: With Wilderness Inquiry, Captain Planet Foundation tailored the Quest to Minnesota waterways and is now committed to launching across the state. Captain Planet Foundation has pledged $25,000 to fund watershed improvement projects in Minnesota through the Quest.
* Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR): The MN DNR is a key partner in program implementation as Wilderness Inquiry programs utilize public lands such as state parks and water trails.
* National Park Service (NPS): NPS provides in-kind support of staff time and materials for program implementation along the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area.

**IV. LONG-TERM IMPLEMENTATION AND FUNDING:**

The Minnesota Freshwater Quest is a newly developed online platform that is specifically tailored to Minnesota waterways and species. ENRTF funds provide initial implementation funds to launch the Quest statewide, offering a platform for school districts to implement environmental education with hands-on learning experiences. Wilderness Inquiry is committed to enhancing and expanding the Quest over time with public and private long-term funding sources such as the Environmental Protection Agency, USDA Forest Service, Department of Education, foundations, corporations, and individuals.