**PROJECT TITLE: Providing Residential Environmental Learning Experiences to Underserved Students**

**I. PROJECT STATEMENT**

1. We wish to build on the success of our recent ENRTF grant, which at year end will have served over 850 K-12 students from 21 schools, by further reducing barriers keeping children from experiencing nature and connect a minimum of 1,000 underserved Minnesota K-12 students to the environment. This will be done by creating an informational video in multiple languages detailing what students, parents and teachers can expect during their trip and by providing field trip and busing scholarships to under-served K-12 schools for a residential environmental learning experience at the Audubon Center of the North Woods (ACNW).

* There is an urgent problem: Today’s students are increasingly being left out of nature learning experiences with children today spending less than 30 minutes daily outside, far less time than previous generations. This is compounded for students on the low socio-economic spectrum as there are typically no outdoor areas near where they live, or adults who spend time with them in natural areas.
* Increasingly, schools do not have financial resources for environmental field trips. Additional factors impeding participation are the cultural and language barriers increasingly seen with Minnesota’s diversifying population. Parents do not understand what the experience is, and are wary of sending their child on an overnight field trip. Students coming from low economic families cannot afford to pay the student fee, and parents have misconceptions or inaccurate fears for their child’s safety and choose to not send their child, reducing the percentage of students per school who attend.
* Our recent ENRTF grant has made significant strides in reaching underserved K-12 students. By the start of the 2019-20 school year, we will have provided scholarships to over 850 K-12 students and 21 schools for residential environmental learning experiences who otherwise would not have been able to attend.
* We as a society have a responsibility to foster environmentally literate citizens from all backgrounds and it starts with our children. They will make the decisions in our society’s future.

2. Many factors are converging to make it more difficult for K-12 students to have nature-based field trips..

* 38% of MN’s K-12 students (more than 323,000 children) qualify for free-and-reduced price (FRP) meals.
* In 2005-06, only 14% of schools had student populations with 50% or more students qualifying for FRP

meals, in 2015-16, that had grown to nearly one-quarter (24%) of all schools.

* When compared with inflation, MN schools today receive $2,500 less per K-12 student than in 1991-92.
* Average hourly earnings for U.S. workers peaked more than 46 years ago in January 1973. Since that time, household incomes have failed to keep up with inflation, with income inequality widening.
* Since 2010, Minnesota’s black population has increased by 31%, its Hispanic population has increased by 20%, and its Asian population has increased by 30%, all far outpacing national population increases.
* There are growing cultural and language barriers to getting students into nature. Minnesota has the highest Somali population in the US (over 75,000) and second highest Hmong population (over 85,000).
* We want to be proactive in reaching more communities of color and low socio-economic status to make nature an inclusive, accessible and comfortable learning experience for all demographics.

3. We want to engage with the diverse and changing demographics of MN’s schools by offering scholarships to financially strained schools to come to the Audubon Center of the North Woods for 1-4 night residential environmental learning experiences. Currently, over 4,000 K-12 learners from 75 schools annually attend ACNW, and last year 52% of those students qualified for free-and-reduced price meals. 46% identified as Caucasian, 17% as Black, 15% as Asian, 15% as Hispanic, 3% as American Indian, and 4% as Two Races or Other.

* Through our most popular 2-night, 3-day residential environmental learning stay, students experience six 2-hour classes, two evening programs, receive seven meals and two nights lodging.
* Teachers select from their choice of over forty class options during their stay in the fields of biological, earth, and physical sciences, adventure, energy, food, cultural history, and team building.
* We will make lasting connections and open students’ eyes and minds to a world they previously didn’t know, creating awareness that their actions have environmental impacts. Studies show that most people who develop a love of nature trace it back to a positive childhood experience with a caring adult.

4. We would offer scholarship assistance of up to 100% of the $118/student cost for a 2-night, 3-day experience, as well as busing scholarships if needed. 1, 3 and 4 night experiences also are available.

* We would serve K-12 student populations in the Twin Cities metro area, as well as greater Minnesota.
* Eligible schools would be schools that show a clear financial need through our scholarship application process, and are not currently attending another residential environmental learning center.
* We would create an informative video for teachers and parents to show them what their students would experience, addressing safety, educational and logistical questions and concerns they may have. This video would have English, Spanish, Somali and Hmong versions and be posted online to view easily.

**II. PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES**

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| **Activity 1 Title:** Provide K-12 Residential Scholarships  **Description:** Providing overnight scholarships to schools that show clear financial need whether due to lack of school or parent financial support, or a combination of both. Up to 100% of student fee would be possible, based on need. Busing scholarships to help with the cost of transportation would also be available.  **ENRTF BUDGET: $125,000**  **Activity 2 Title:** K-12 Informational Video  **Description:**We wish to create an informative video addressing the questions and concerns we regularly hear from teachers and parents regarding the experience their students and children will have at ACNW. We have found that parents are increasingly concerned with safety, accommodations, privacy, learning environments, instruction, meeting dietary restrictions, and bathrooms. Creating a film with versions in English, Hmong, Somali and Spanish aimed at teachers and parents to address those concerns will increase the likelihood their students and children will attend and experience nature. Our last ENRTF grant addressed accessibility by supplying students with winter gear to wear, and translating all our K-12 forms into Spanish, Somali and Hmong. These steps have greatly helped, but through extensive discussions with parents and teachers, we see this video as a clear need for more parents to feel comfortable about sending their child on the learning experience.  **ENRTF BUDGET: $25,000** |  |

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| **Outcome** | **Completion Date** |
| *1. Provide minimum of 1,000 K-12 public school students residential experiences at the Audubon Center of the North Woods. Special consideration will be given to schools with high numbers of 1) FRP meal eligible students, 2) minority and 3) immigrant populations.* | *June 30, 2023* |
| *2. Create multi-language informational video to show teachers and parents what students will experience, and addressing safety, lodging, learning, privacy and meal concerns.* | *Dec 31, 2020* |

**III. PROJECT PARTNERS AND COLLABORATORS:**

This project will have partnerships with school districts from across the state as we work with school leaders to bring their students to the Audubon Center of the North Woods.

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

Over recent years, we have secured scholarships annually from Ecolab, the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis, St. Paul Audubon Society, Minnesota River Valley Audubon Chapter, the Onan Family Foundation, and developed our own annual K-12 fundraiser to bolster our scholarship offerings, connecting more students to nature.