



Bridge to Nature

Recipient: Wilderness Youth Project
Project Period: 9/1/2022 – 3/28/2024
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Summary of Accomplishments

During the grant period, Wilderness Youth Project (WYP) continued to successfully facilitate our Bridge to Nature program, which delivered the benefits to the public of: increased access to nature, outdoor education, and mentorship programming for marginalized students (low-income students and students of color, in particular). In 2022-2023, our Bridge to Nature program enhanced the recreational use and enjoyment of coastal and ocean recreation in the County of Santa Barbara (downcoast of Coal Oil Point) for youth from preschool through elementary school.

Of the nine monthly field trips that our Bridge to Nature program participants took during the 2022-2023 school year, at least three took place along the coast (either at a beach or coastal mesa). We reached our goal of having each individual Bridge to Nature participant visit downcoast of Coal Oil Point at least once during the school year. Tide-pooling and beach/mesa ecology were key focal points of these excursions, as well as ocean play and surveying the greater concept of the Santa Barbara Channel, its islands, tides, currents, and local watersheds.

We successfully reached our key program objectives as described in our proposal:

- 1) We served approximately 600 students (a majority of students are from low-income families and qualify for free or reduced price lunch) through Bridge to Nature in the 2022-23 school year.
- 2) Each student went on at least nine field trips (including three to four in coastal areas); with each field trip lasting approximately four hours.

Our Bridge to Nature program continued to connect youth with nature, peers, and mentors; all of which has been shown to encourage confidence, emotional and social growth, investment in education and learning, and environmental stewardship. One of the key ways we measure WYP's success and impact are the words and experiences of our participants during our programs. One 10-year-old participant reflected to us: "Before I came to WYP, I was a destroyer of nature. But my heart changed and now I am a protector of nature." Another fourth grader put it simply: "I never knew nature would be that interesting. WYP is the best thing that has ever happened to me in my entire life."

Project Activities

As outlined in our original proposal, each Bridge to Nature program participant spent 27-30 total hours in nature with a mentor during the 2022-2023 school year. Youth took field trips in small groups of 16 students or fewer, with a 1:4 ratio of mentors to students to ensure individualized attention. Youth who went to participate in our summer camps spent an additional 30 hours of time outdoors.

Our overarching objective with Bridge to Nature is to ensure that nature connection programs are accessible to all students— particularly those who belong to marginalized communities who historically have had uneven access to nature, outdoor education, and mentorship programming. The majority of students we served in 2022-2023 were from Latinx, low-income families. About 20% of Bridge to Nature participants we served in 2022-2023 had a physical or cognitive/emotional disability, and roughly half were English learners. WYP is motivated by the core principle that all children need nature, not just the ones whose families have privilege and access to nature or those of a certain race or economic class or culture or gender or sexual identity or language or set of abilities.

Our full list of Bridge to Nature program sites in 2022-2023 included the following:

School Day:

- Adams Elementary
- Adelante Charter School
- Cleveland Elementary
- Franklin Elementary
- Harding Elementary
- Notre Dame Elementary
- St. Raphael Elementary
- Peabody Charter School

Daytime/Early Childhood

- Storyteller
- Carpinteria Children's Project

Afterschool

- El Centro/ Westside Community Center
- McKinley Elementary Afterschool
- Casa de los Carneros/ People's Self-Help Housing
- Dahlia Court/ People's Self-Help Housing
- Police Activities League (PAL)

Students began their program days by being picked up from their classrooms or community sites by WYP staff, and gathering in a nearby green space. We used vans to transport students to coastal zones and other natural destinations and facilitate our programming. As we have brought more and more kids into nature this past year, we have watched with excitement and pride as youth in the Bridge to Nature program got outdoors,

practiced creativity through journaling and creating poems together, and become inspired, curious learners who have an “experience bank” to draw from in school and in life. Bridge to Nature youth participated in all the following activities as described in our proposal:

A WYP participant:

1. Self-directs play and engages in sensory/awareness activities
2. Practices empathy with self, others, and plants/animals
3. Engages in sit spots and trust-building exercises
4. Faces challenges and expands capabilities mentally and physically
5. Connects with peers during circles, games, and free-play activities
6. Listens and shares in opening circles
7. Practices gratitude weekly
8. Identifies local plants and animals
9. Sees the coast as a place they belong
10. Finds joy in outdoor recreation
11. Cares for and tends to plants and animals
12. Experiences awe and reverence

In our programs, mentors know, welcome, and include each participant personally. Our programs are so impactful because connection is our bottom line. Here are a few comments we recently received this past year when we asked parents to share any other thoughts or comments about their experience of the WYP mentors and volunteers:

- “They are kind, supportive, accessible, and focused on helping each child grow and get the most out of every day.”
- “Everyone at WYP is so great to communicate with, and when I drop off my child, I know she is in very good hands.”
- “The staff is truly amazing and really is a major reason that we keep coming back to the program.”
- “We continue to be so impressed with the staff and their level of commitment to the kids.”

One of the most compelling ways we measure our success is the anecdotal evidence from kids, teachers, parents, and community leaders. One parent says, “WYP’s program has helped my daughter to feel more confident, learn problem solving skills, be respectful of nature, make connections, and master her motor skills. She is always excited to tell me all the stories of her adventures and share what she is learning. During the weekend she invites us (her parents) to go explore the different places she goes with the program. This gives us the opportunity to learn with her. I feel grateful for the opportunity my daughter has to experience the program.”

Another parent had this to say about our programs: “My daughter relished going out on a different adventure every day she was at WYP. She swam in creeks, explored new beaches, and played games with the fabulous staff. I am so grateful WYP exists to share all the natural wonders of this area with our kids. They are sure to grow up loving and protecting nature after these great experiences outdoors.”

Project Outcomes

In 2022-2023, we saw success with the following proposed intermediate outcomes that we described in our original proposal:

WYP participants...

1. Feel valued by adults outside their family
2. Feel connected to and cares for others

3. Are led by curiosity
4. Practice gratitude
5. Care about the natural world
6. Feel comfortable in natural settings
7. Find joy in being outdoors
8. Gain knowledge of the world around them through experience
9. Feel strong and comfortable in their body
10. Feel a sense of belonging (with self and community)
11. Have risk-management skills
12. Share and listen peacefully
13. Feel self-confident
14. Feel a sense of place in the natural world

We measured these program outcomes through our robust evaluation process. Wilderness Youth Project's Theory of Change and Program Evaluation are based on the Search Institute's Developmental Assets Framework. Our evaluation questions map to the following Internal Assets: Commitment to Learning; Positive Values; Social Competencies; and Positive Identity. Because of its proven success in measuring youth development, resiliency, and prevention, the Developmental Assets evidence-based framework has become the single most widely used approach to positive youth development in the United States.

Evaluation is conducted by our Associate Program Director, Gloria Sanchez- Arreola. Gloria combines her MA in Social Sciences and Comparative Education and her prior positions as an Education Specialist for Transitional Youth at the County Education Office and Mental Health Outreach specialist for La Casa de La Raza to perform this role successfully. Evaluation occurs at the end of each season of programming (we break the school year into four seasons for our programs).

We provide parents with a post-program survey, which includes true/false and open-ended questions to measure these four categories of growth:

- 1.) Individual (self-confidence, love of learning)
- 2.) Interpersonal (respect for others and conflict resolution abilities)
- 3.) Physical (physical confidence and agility)
- 4.) Environmental (respect for the natural world)

In our most recent evaluations, we saw that 100% of WYP parents and staff noticed growth in participants' love for nature, 95% noticed a growth in curiosity, and 91% noticed growth in participant's physical confidence and movement. When surveyed, 79% of parents/guardians also strongly agreed that they found it easy to connect with WYP staff, 83% strongly agreed that the mentors offered activities that were engaging for participants, and 100% strongly agreed that mentors provided positive mentorship to participants.

One parent gave us the following feedback: “Wilderness Youth Project provides a much-needed resource for the community. Embracing nature [and] building awareness and stewardship for our earth by teaching our young people, while sharing the joy of the outdoors is truly a gift to all!”

Another parent described; “My son just turned 10, and he is shy. The first day my son was quite fearful and insecure. All it took was one afternoon with the WYP team. The next week my son was already engaged in new friendships and looking forward to being with the group again.”

Another way that we evaluate our programs beyond surveys is through 30-minute staff meetings before and after each program. These meetings allow us to evaluate programming throughout the season and make real-time changes to tailor our programs and ensure we are meeting our intended outcomes.

The proposed long-term outcomes we listed in our original proposal included:

WYP participants...

1. Feel a sustained connection to nature
2. Are happier, healthier and smarter

After more than 20 years working on the South Coast, we see these long-term outcomes time and time again. Many students continue with WYP programs for years and are able to build lasting relationships with our staff members, who help them to expand their understanding of their own potential as well as to cultivate a strong connection with nature.

This parent note we recently received illustrates our long-term impact: “Our daughter has grown up participating in WYP. WYP has supported both her and our family during our rough times. The mentors and her WYP experiences have given her a deep appreciation of the natural world, and now that she is getting ready for college, she wants to study ecology, conservation, or biology... I believe her time in WYP is leading her in that direction.”

Table 1. Number of Participants in each program over the 2022/2023 school year. 763 total participants were supported through this grant for excursions downcoast of Coal Oil Point.

Program	Total # Students
School Programs	424
Community Programs	132
Afterschool Programs	207
Total	763

The Future

We are thrilled to be expanding our Bridge to Nature program to two new school sites in 2023-2024, Monroe Elementary and Aliso School. We have formal MOUs with both Santa Barbara Unified School District (SBUSD) and Carpinteria Unified School District (CUSD) to continue providing our Bridge to Nature programs. Our relationships with the schools are stronger than ever. In fact, ShaKenya Edison, SBUSD’s Assistant Superintendent of Student Services, recently surveyed principals at all of the district schools regarding their perspective on WYP programs. She called WYP to report: everyone who has WYP on campus wants more. Everyone who doesn’t have WYP wants your program on campus.

As youth continue to face increased mental health and academic challenges, we have witnessed that many

people have become more aware of the importance of nature connection opportunities for youth. This increased interest has resulted in WYP receiving more partnership opportunities. For example, we have become a part of a Cottage Population Health Pediatric Resiliency Initiative, which has broadened our partnerships to include neighborhood and community clinics.

Nature connection has been shown to support youth who have experienced toxic stress and/or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). Former California Surgeon General, Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, announced in 2021 that the state was adding “access to nature” to its list of seven Stress Busters as published in the Roadmap for Resilience, which highlights how toxic stress and ACEs impact long term community health. WYP provides a powerful response to ACEs by connecting youth, especially those who face the most barriers to accessing nature, to wild places and mentorship.

Lessons Learned

Our greatest challenge is shared with many local organizations: due to the high cost of living in Santa Barbara, we regularly lose staff members who choose to relocate to more affordable communities. Mentors are the heart of WYP and the key to why participants have such positive experiences. Paying a living wage and fostering long term tenure is crucial to maintain our program quality.

Project Photos



Students from Adelante Charter School play in the waves at Rincon Beach during their monthly Bridge to Nature 3.5-hour adventure. Of the nine monthly Bridge to Nature trips during the school year, at least three take place along the coast (either at a beach or coastal mesa). Throughout the year, students have the opportunity to explore and learn about ocean and coastal ecology, build relationships and with our experienced staff mentors, and develop a deep and lasting connection with their natural surroundings. Our Bridge to Nature program aims to address systemic disparities by ensuring that marginalized youth have access to nature, high-quality outdoor education, and individualized mentorship.



Students from Adelante Charter School test their balancing skills on a piece of driftwood at Rincon Beach during their monthly Bridge to Nature 3.5-hour adventure.



Students from Adelante Charter School play in the waves at Rincon Beach during their monthly Bridge to Nature 3.5-hour adventure.



Students from Cleveland Elementary explore Finny St. Beach during their monthly Bridge to Nature 3.5-hour adventure.



Students from Cleveland Elementary play in the waves at Finny St. Beach during their monthly Bridge to Nature 3.5-hour adventure.



A participant in our Dahlia Court afterschool program holds up the shells she found at Rincon Beach during her weekly Bridge to Nature 3-hour adventure.



Participants from our Dahlia Court afterschool program play in the sand at Rincon Beach during their weekly Bridge to Nature 3-hour adventure.



Students from The Notre Dame School take a paddleboard out at the Santa Barbara Harbor during their monthly Bridge to Nature 3.5-hour adventure.