Instilling a Stewardship Ethic

A sage-covered bluff overlooking the Tonsina River makes the perfect outdoor classroom for the Copper River Stewardship Program.
Dear Friends of WISE,

By all measures, 2015 was a successful year for Wrangell Institute for Science and Environment. More people than ever before, the young and the not-so-young, were served by WISE programs of science and environmental education. Hikes in the woods! Camps in the snow! Classroom lessons! Wall tent presentations! Watershed studies!

We invite you to read about some of these exciting programs in the newsletter pages that follow.

With its tiny staff and limited facilities, how has WISE accomplished so much? The answer is found in the energies, resources, and dedication of our many partners and volunteers. WISE greatly appreciates each of these, and all who assist, through membership or other means, with the WISE mission.

Why does WISE pursue its mission of science and environmental education? One motivation is the hope that a sense of stewardship will be strengthened in those who take part in its programs. At a recent meeting, the Board of Directors reaffirmed stewardship as one of the WISE core values.

WISE does not practice advocacy, but we do practice education. WISE provides accurate information and meaningful experiences, in settings that are fertile for the growth of a thirst for knowledge. WISE believes that those who experience this kind of education will make “WISE” choices, shaping their own lives as stewards of the planet they have come to know and love.

So what is stewardship? If we remember that Earth is our home, then stewardship means taking care of our “house,” our home planet, so that it endures as a good place for ourselves and others to live.

Stewardship means we stop tearing wood from the walls to feed the furnace. Instead, we begin to repair the walls, the leaking roof, the broken windows of this “house.” We tend to the neglected garden and woodlot to provide for our needs. We do all of this in order that we may live well-blessed lives, fulfilling both our material and spiritual propensities. But we also do this so that the tenants who follow us—our own children—may live in wealth and beauty.

The practice of stewardship is an acknowledgement that we are not alone, that our generation is not the only generation, our time is not the only time, and that what we do to the earth today will change the lives of the future inhabitants of the planet. Effective stewards are those who have chosen to work toward the happy vision of securing a good home for ourselves and our children in a rich garden of continuing wonder and delight—our Earth, that is, if we only choose to keep it.

Thanks to all who make this WISE work possible!

David Wellman
WISE Founder and board Vice President

Thank You!

Newsletter Photos: Paul Boos, Janelle Eklund, Marnie Graham, Kate Morse, Lyda Rossi, Robben Taylor, Robin Mayo.

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Family Ice Fishing Day
Our favorite spring fun day took on an international flavor this year, with participants from as far away as Honduras and Spain.

In-Class Science Lessons
As well as the usual offerings, WISE founder Carla Schierholt joined us this spring for Salmon Dissection classes at three different schools. More on page 4.

Camp Chosen Frozen
Over 60 students braved the cold of March nights to camp out at Meiers Lake. See page 7.

Earth Discovery Day
The Wrangell-St Elias National Park Visitors Center got its annual wake-up call in early May, when elementary students converged to get in touch with the Earth.

Science Lecture Series
We hosted guests from around the state to share their research. Best “aha” moment—did you know that in addition to high alpine dwelling marmots, Alaska has marmots that live on beaches?

Project Healing Waters
Stories from adventurers around the world were heard around the campfire at Tangle Lakes at this annual fly fishing excursion for wounded veterans.

Copper River Stewardship Program
This year our 10 teenage stewards explored, surveyed, smiled and sang their way through a watershed-side adventure.

‘Take it Outside’ Hikes
Working with the Glennallen BLM office, we hosted a series of day hikes all over the Copper Valley followed by an overnight backpacking trip. See the story on page 5.

Aquatic Ecology Camp
Aquatic Ecology Campers spent 3 days exploring and learning on the McCarthy Road.

Copper Country Discovery Tour
WISE enjoyed a record year, with over 300 guests joining us for the tour. Meet the guide on page 4.

Willow Creek Research Project
Four different high school students worked as research assistants this summer.

Invasive Weed Smackdown
We joined our partners in the Copper Basin Cooperative Weed Management Area to organize this annual event.

Salmon Blitz
On our fall field trips we found salmon fry in two previously unsurveyed stretches of stream.

Changing Seasons Program
This fall event brings 2nd and 3rd graders outdoors to explore the world as the seasons change in autumn.

WISE also assists with partner programs throughout the year. For details see the 2015 Annual Report at

Dear WISE,
Thank you for teaching us new things. I learned that while bird watching I have to be silent so the birds don’t fly away. I like using binoculars.

Sincerely, Kayden
Youth Speak Out for the Environment

In February, three Copper Valley teens joined WISE and a contingent from Copper River Watershed Project to attend the Alaska Forum on the Environment. Before travelling to Anchorage, they collected shoes for a recycling project, keeping over 100 pairs out of the landfill.

The students gave a presentation on the Copper River Stewardship Program for a breakout session, and attended seminars on topics ranging from amphibians in Alaska to historic preservation. Highlights included joining a keynote speaker on the main stage to share their wisdom on what it takes to engage youth in environmental projects, and attending a lunch session on a voyage to document plastic debris in the ocean.

We returned home inspired by new friends, new ideas, and newfound resolve to keep spreading our message of stewardship.

On the Importance of Saying “Very Interesting…”

What do you say when you find a whole salmon, complete with slime, head, and guts, on your school desk? If you are a Copper Valley kid, you know exactly what to say. This winter WISE founder Carla Schierholt joined us for salmon dissection days at three schools. One of the first things students learned was to avoid saying “yuck!” or “gross!” Instead, Carla coached them to be like scientists and exclaim “VERY INTERESTING!” when they felt pushed out of their comfort zone.

Salmon are an important resource here in the Copper Valley, and also a cultural icon that is important to all. They feed our ecosystems, bringing rich nutrients from the sea when they return to their home streams to spawn. As youth learn to understand and respect salmon’s dynamic life cycle, they learn that everything is connected. To care for salmon is to care for the whole watershed.

An Alumni Returns as a Valued Employee

WISE’s Copper Country Discovery Tour this summer. She delighted guests with her bright personality and stories of life at forty below. Mariah is a nursing student at Oral Roberts University, and this spring participated in a mission trip to India to provide medical services.

For Mariah, her job as naturalist/guide served as the final step in a learning process that began on WISE programs. She explained, “Learn, study, then teach to others, that is officially how you really learn.” Mariah brushed up on knowledge about local plants and wildlife, then to make the tour her own, drew on her passion for the history of the area, including stories about early explorers, the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad and the copper mines at Kennecott.

After her graduation this spring, Mariah plans to return to Alaska, pass her board exams, and begin building experience as an ER nurse, working towards her goal of being a flight nurse. She plans to continue to do mission and philanthropy work, and has already learned one of the most essential lessons for those who wish to help others. “In reality, people may be happy where they are, we need to understand a situation and culture before we try to fix anything.”

Students get a close look at the inside of a salmon during a dissection lab for homeschool families.

Mariah Doty, a college student who grew up in Kenny Lake, worked as the Naturalist/Guide for
One Step at a Time

By Robin Mayo

A small herd of youth, young adults, and not-so-young adults straggled out of the van after the long ride up to Tangle Lakes. We unloaded a pile of assorted gear and started the somewhat daunting task of fitting it into our backpacks.

One of the kids looked around the campground where we were parked, and said, “So, this is where we are camping?”

I was stopped in my tracks, wondering if I should laugh or cry. I hadn’t been sure if this particular youth was ready for this trip, but after hearing my long and somewhat dramatic description of exactly what it meant to go backpacking, he’d insisted he wanted to come. So here we were, and apparently he’d forgotten the part about walking for hours with all our belongings on our backs.

A last-minute and somewhat chaotic scene ensued, with everyone piling, sorting, and stuffing gear into backpacks. Luckily, we had some logistical support—WISE board member Paul Boos and his small boat which would carry some of the heavier group items to our campsite. Paul had a special interest in this expedition, as his granddaughter Audrey was one of the hikers, setting off on her first ever backcountry adventure. Grandma Janelle Eklund joined us on the hike, proudly shouldering the vintage frame pack she first used on a National Outdoor Leadership School expedition over 3 decades ago.

Finally everyone had a reasonably tidy pack assembled, and we headed out. Spirits were high as we trekked through the campground, crossed a bridge, and hiked a few hundred yards along the Denali Highway to the beginning of our trail. Then reality hit hard, as the trail headed straight up a steep bluff. Silly chatter stopped as boots dug in to the soft gravel, and the true weight of our packs was felt for the first time. At the top of the hill we paused to regroup, adjust backpacks, and tighten boot laces.

Our trail wound among the hills above Upper Tangle Lakes for about four miles, with plenty of steep ups and downs. When the brush got thick in the low spots, some of the shorter hikers disappeared altogether. Along the tops of ridges, we enjoyed full-circle views of the lakes and hills. We were delighted to find that the first of the blueberries were ripening, giving an excuse for frequent stops to snack and rest.

A partly cloudy sky grew steadily darker as the day progressed, and soon we were walking in a steady drizzle, getting soaked from above, and also from pushing through the wet brush along the trail. But the weather lifted as we arrived at our camp, a broad beach on a secluded lake.

We hurried to set up camp in the lull. Some of the best lessons to be learned in the outdoors are resourcefulness and flexibility. We got a real-life demonstration when we started to set up one of the tents, and discovered that the wrong set of poles had been packed. There was no choice but to set up the mismatched collection of nylon and aluminum, resulting in a wrinkled, lumpy mess instead of a nice tall tent with good tight fly. Luckily, the tent still did a good job of providing shelter from the drizzling all-night rain.

For dinner, we gathered under a rain tarp and the hikers assembled and reconstituted their own “camping gloop” from an assortment of ingredients including instant mashed potatoes, dry stuffing, gravy mix, cheese, jerky, and dehydrated veggies. There was much laughter and comparing of recipes as everyone experimented with different ingredients. With appetites whetted by the tough day, even the oddest combinations were deemed palatable.

On our return to civilization, we shared pizzas and some impressions of the trip. One young lady who had amazed everyone with her can-do attitude and lack of complaint for the entire trip floored us when she confessed it was the first time she had ever been camping. Backpacking in the rain on a sketchy trail may be one of the truest tests of character, and all on this expedition passed with flying colors. Even the guy who wanted to camp in the parking lot.

The kitchen tarp gives welcome shelter under a threatening sky

Impromptu found-object art sessions and group poetry enlivened rest stops

Backpacking Group Poem

Going up the hill, tiring, but we finally got to our destination.
It was a really awesome trip but I got a little worried on the way.
I like the trip!
The yucky feeling of the water in my shoes, when I take a step it sloshes around.
Going up and down the hills, it was tiring but good exercise.
Caribou foot, lots of bones.
Moose and Calf, very cool!
I wonder who left that caribou foot on the ridge.
Colorful raingear on a windswept ridge.
I am wet but I am happy.
WISE/BLM Partnership: Ready for another 5 years

By Robin Mayo

The above mantra neatly sums up the first five years of our “Take It Outside” Youth Initiative agreement with BLM, and our plans for the next five years.

In August, WISE and the US Bureau of Land Management Glennallen Field Office (BLM-GFO) wrapped up our first five year agreement. This 5-year period was a time of great change and growth for WISE, and the financial resources and logistical support provided by the BLM-GFO were very important in guiding this growth. WISE transitioned from volunteer and part-time staff to hiring a full-time executive director in 2010. This move greatly increased our capacity to develop the organization and provide quality programming. The financial stability enabled by our 5-year BLM agreement was instrumental in making the transition successful. But even more importantly, the generous sharing of ideas, expertise, time, and resources shown by all members of the BLM-GFO staff enabled WISE to confidently move forward.

In those 5 years, we tallied up some impressive numbers. On core WISE-led programs such as hikes, camps, Earth Discovery Day and the Copper River Stewardship Program, we had a total of 2,873 youth participant days, filled with adventures and learning. In addition, we helped out at 18 other partner-led events such as National Public Lands Day, Invasive Weed Smackdown, and Project Healing Waters. We expanded our partnerships throughout the Copper River Valley and Statewide. Most importantly, we touched a whole lot of lives, shared the outdoors, inspired careers, and learned about this amazing place we call home.

BLM-GFO was a valued partner long before we had a formal agreement, as BLM staff were frequent contributors to early WISE programs. But in 2010 newly hired WISE Executive Director Bruce James worked with Marnie Graham, BLM-GFO Public Affairs Specialist, to join forces to further our shared missions. The BLM’s mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. This meshes well with the WISE mission of providing science and environmental education, resources for learning, and support for scientific research. Both organizations count stewardship as one of their core values, and believe that from learning and experience comes the desire to care for our lands.

The day after we concluded our first five-year agreement period, we were thrilled to jump right back into action. We started a new five-year stint without a hitch. Actually, the transition happened in the middle of our Aquatic Ecology Camp, so we just kept right on doing what we love to do without a break.

What will the next five years of WISE/BLM programs look like? For the most part, we will keep doing what we do best: hikes, camps, school programs, volunteer events. One of the biggest new goals will happen behind the scenes, as we hope to capture some of our collective knowledge, and share it with others who would like to do science and environmental programming for youth. We hope that the partnership approach we have developed can be replicated in other rural communities throughout the state.

Thank You BLM for a great 5 years, and many more to come.

Former WISE Executive Director Bruce James pioneered the WISE/BLM cooperative agreement. He also loved to hike with youth.
As the sun goes down on a frozen lake in the foothills of the Alaska Range, a swarm of middle school students are hurrying to make camp for the night. Earlier in the day they shoveled huge mounds of snow, packing the surface. The crystals “sintered,” bonding to each other strongly. Now the interior can be carved out, making cozy igloo-like structures called “quinzees.” The students have been vying for the privilege of being chosen to sleep in the snow shelters, working hard and even volunteering to do the dishes. The remaining youth will bed down in bright yellow Arctic Oven tents.

This is the second annual Camp Chosen Frozen, the brainchild of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve Education Specialist Glenn Hart. Middle school classes from Copper River School District and beyond pack their warmest gear and spend one or two nights at the remote camp, learning about everything from muskrat trapping to snowmachine maintenance.

For many of the students, it is their first winter camping experience. There are many lessons to be learned here, from how to manage your mittens to keep them dry, to the importance of proper food and hydration.

One of the unique aspects of education programs like these is they tend to break down the formal divisions between teachers and students, adults and youth. Especially at winter camp, everyone is dealing with the same problems, and the casual camp atmosphere lends plenty of opportunities for mentoring. Recognizing that just being there is challenge enough for many students, there is no pressure for them to participate. Several campers found they were comfortable in the kitchen, and we spent many happy hours visiting and working on prepping meals for the group.

One of the most popular activities this spring was muskrat trapping. Glenn helped the students identify pushups, (above-ice shelter and food storage structures) and set traps, then check them the next day. Students then learned to skin the catch, and almost everyone tried some muskrat meat at dinner. This coming spring we plan to do skin sewing projects and make gifts for elders with the tanned skins from 2015, completing the circle of learning about subsistence and the sharing of the riches of the land.

Activities like these have a profound effect on youth, teaching them respect for the environment, and skills that will help them whenever they go. Many arrive apprehensive and unsure of their ability to survive, and leave with a new sense of pride and accomplishment. They discover a new meaning of “connection,” feeling at home and confident in a harsh environment.
Looking Ahead

By Robin Mayo

In November, the WISE board of directors and advisory board met to map out a strategic plan for the next five years. As “homework” beforehand, participants were asked some theoretical questions, such as “In a perfect world, with unlimited resources, what would you like to see WISE accomplish in the next five years?” and “with severely limited resources, what is the last thing WISE should continue to do?” The answers gave a window into the hopes and dreams of the 15 diverse individuals who serve on the WISE board and advisory board.

While mired in the day-to-day tasks of managing, budgeting, scheduling, and teaching, it can be easy to lose sight of the higher ideals we are striving for, and the strategic thinking that is needed to make a real difference. The board retreat was a great chance for us to sit back and take a look at some “10,000 foot level” issues. What big lessons have been learned in the past 12 years, and what thorny challenges lie ahead? What can we do to not only further our mission, but encourage other organizations in other areas to do the same?

As a small, locally based organization with a majority of founders still active on the board, WISE has great strengths but also some vulnerabilities. If we were to go through an “unplanned transition,” also know as “what if the ED gets hit by a bus,” much of our organizational wisdom and culture could be lost. A mantra I repeat to myself every day is that WISE does not belong to me, or the board, or even the members. As a nonprofit, WISE belongs to the community, and we constantly rely on the goodwill and support of our donors, patrons, neighbors, and friends.

Most things will not change much in the next five years. We like the track we are on and the results we are achieving. We will have an increased emphasis on mentorship, and more outreach to other communities. We will continue to develop earned income and strive for financial sustainability. And we will remember our core values in everything we do.

**WISE Core Values**

*Stewardship—Grassroots Involvement—Partnerships*

*Integrity—Sharing Copper Basin’s Natural Wonders*

*Sense of Place—Mentorship*

The Value of “Getting Out There”

By Jamie Dawson

“A beautiful place in the rearview mirror, and a beautiful place in the windshield… What more can you ask for?” Those were some of the last words my partner, Tyler, said to me before I reluctantly pointed my tires north and left my home in northwestern Montana. A few weeks and a couple thousand miles later, I’m finally settling in to the Copper River basin and have been fortunate to receive an amazingly warm welcome full of fireside chats and (delicious) caribou hearts.

I’ve joined WISE to work as the third and final VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America), and can already see that my 1 year term is going to fly by. During my year as Development Coordinator I’ll be searching for sustainable funding, promoting fee-based programs, and doing all I can to ensure that WISE will continue long past my time as a VISTA.

I come to WISE with multiple perspectives in mind. You can imagine that, since I was raised in a rural community by a mechanic of a fairly productive gold mine, environment and education were never words I’d heard in the same sentence. We didn’t talk about conservation, but we did get out there. We camped, fished, hiked, and explored. It wasn’t intentional, but the very experience of just being outside and loving a place instilled stewardship values in me, almost as if by accident. Even with that giant missing piece, I still turned out this way – and that gives me hope.

I didn’t have access to education programs like those that WISE provides until I was far past adolescence, but I have seen the amazing effects they can have on students and a community. It’s for that reason, and many more, that I love this work am thrilled to be joining the WISE team.

Jamie gets to know Tikka on an orientation tour of Wellwood Nature Preserve
"Instilling stewardship—sharing with others the art of caring for the environment we inherit and inhabit."
Gay Wellman, Board Secretary

"Instilling environmental stewardship involves teaching our youth that it is not enough to practice good stewardship ethics but, have a responsibility to be “doers” and get involved in making our earth better then they found it. WISE provides opportunities for youth and adults to learn about natural history and get outside to experience our area. We also provide hands-on opportunities to work on projects and programs that improve the environment and instill pride of accomplishment.”
Paul Boos, Board Treasurer

"Providing a microscope to young people to explore the inner world of nature - lichens, wasps, leaves, spruce sap, fireweed seeds, yarrow, etc - hearing exclamations of 'WOW! This is really cool!'. Detailed observation drawings before and after the microscope. All leading to inspiration and appreciation which means instilling stewardship."
Janelle Eklund, Board President

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Paul Boos, Board Treasurer

"When an organization puts value on the smallest of plants, aquatic critters, and connects them to things that sustain our lives, we create stewardship. Stewardship to me is an ethic, one which makes us see our natural world as an important part of our lives and existence. This is reality. WISE instills stewardship in all their educational efforts, and therefore I support the continued work that WISE does, under many difficult and demanding conditions. I am proud to serve as a Board Member of such an organization."
Jan Miller, Board Member

"If we remember that Earth is our home, then stewardship means taking care of our "house," our home planet, so it endures as a good place for ourselves and others to live.”
Dave Wellman, Board Vice President

"When I think of stewardship, I think of great responsibility. Being a steward implies that someone trusted you to care and be responsible for something of great value. We should all see ourselves as stewards of our planet, and it’s important that we educate future generations to the importance of the stewardship of our environment.”
Barb Wallace, Board Member

"Providing a microscope to young people to explore the inner world of nature - lichens, wasps, leaves, spruce sap, fireweed seeds, yarrow, etc - hearing exclamations of 'WOW! This is really cool!'. Detailed observation drawings before and after the microscope. All leading to inspiration and appreciation which means instilling stewardship."
Janelle Eklund, Board President

"Stewardship means understanding the long-term impacts of our actions, and choosing to act responsibly, honoring our environment. Stewardship not only requires us to pay attention to our own actions, but also to work towards instilling an ethic of care in future generations.”
Rebekah Donohue, Board Member

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Mission Statement

WISE provides science and environmental education for all ages, resources for learning, and support for scientific research.
**Education Partners**

- Copper River School District
- Prince William Sound College
- University of Alaska Fairbanks
- Valdez City Schools
- Campbell Creek Science Center

**Government and Tribal Partners**

- Alaska Department of Fish and Game
- Americorps VISTA
- Cooperative Extension Service
- Kenny Lake Soil and Water Conservation District
- Mount Sanford Tribal Consortium
- Native Village of Gakona
- Native Village of Gulkana
- Native Village of Kluti-Kaah
- US Bureau of Land Management
- Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve

**Nonprofit Partners**

- Alaska WildBird Rehabilitation
- Ahtna Heritage Foundation
- Copper Basin Child Advocacy Center
- Copper Valley Development Association
- Copper River Watershed Project
- Copper Country Alliance
- Copper Valley Community Library
- The Foraker Group
- Future Educators of Alaska
- Greater Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce
- Kenny Lake Community League
- Kenny Lake Public Library
- Prince William Sound Science Center
- Project Healing Waters
- RurAL CAP
- Wrangell Mountains Center
- Willow Creek Water Consortium
- Wellwood Conservancy

**Quaking Aspen, *populous tremuloides***

**Copper River Stewardship Program participants take a break from paddling on the Copper River Delta**

**WISE staff Robin Mayo and Lyda Rossi, and BLM staff Robben Taylor showing off art projects.**
Spruce $500 and up
Janelle Eklund and Paul Boos
Karen Kelleher
Judy Caminer
Kevin Gottlieb

Diamond Willow up to $100
Christin Anderson
Daniel Bates
Ann Biddle
Melissa Blair
Barbara Collarius
Nancy Deschu
Rebekah and Joe Donohue
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Amazon Smile

For more details on WISE financials, please request our 2015 Annual Report, or see it at www.wise-edu.org

Thank You!
Learn. Grow. GET OUTSIDE