

# Engaging Copper Valley Youth in Land Stewardship

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There are professionals and volunteers throughout Copper River Country with a passion for bringing awareness and knowledge of our unique environment to our school-aged youth.

At the center of local efforts is Wrangell Institute for Science in Environment (WISE) which was formed in 2000 by a group of volunteers dedicated to science-based education.

This emerging non-profit, under the leadership of Janelle Eklund and Paul Boos, strives to bring environmental education and a sense of respect and stewardship of the land to both school children and adult residents.

Their unique programs for students include *Changing Seasons* for 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> grades in the fall, and *Earth Discovery Day* for 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grades in early May. These programs and their lecture series bring professionals, both local and from around the state, to serve as teachers and program presenters.

WISE has initiated a *Copper River Stewardship Program*, where high school students travel down the Copper River to Cordova, expanding their knowledge of watershed conservation and camping ethics.

Students develop outreach materials to share what they have learned with their communities. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), The National Park Service (NPS), Prince William Sound Science Center and the Copper River Watershed Project are all partnering to make this happen.

Dedicated teachers such as Carla Schierholt and Sandy McMahan are involved with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, raising silver salmon fry from hatchery eggs during the school year. Students monitor water temperatures and learn about



*KLSWCD District Manager Doug Vollman works with Youth Crew member installing trail benches. Photo courtesy CVDA*

salmon life cycles, releasing the fry into land-locked lakes in the spring. Other teachers such as Mark Proch work with students to compete in science-based contests, such as the Ocean Sciences Bowl in Seward.

Kenny Lake Soil and Water Conservation District (KLSWCD), under District Manager Doug Vollman, sponsored youth work crews over three summers, constructing trails, brushing fairgrounds, pulling invasive weeds and collecting fish fry and water samples.

The District has ongoing projects in Kenny Lake and Copper Center schools with students growing bedding plants and taking them home to gardens or selling them to raise monies for school programs.

NPS Education Specialist, Glenn Hart helps with nature hikes, day camps, and other interpretive programs. He has been instrumental in helping WISE and other groups generate support and funding to help with outreach activities.

The Park Service also hosts a Junior

Ranger program during the summer, covering various topics concerning the environment, along with day camps held at Twin Lakes on the Nabesna Road, spearheaded by the efforts of former interpreter, Vicki Penwell.

BLM staff, most notably Marnie Graham and Joe Hart, have been organizing *Public Lands Day* events on federal lands, with clean-up work, invasive weed pulls and other educational programs at Sourdough, Denali Highway and in the Tielkel area this fall.

The Native villages also host environmental programs and activities for our youth. This year in late May, the Native Village of Gakona worked with various agencies and organizations to host the second *Youth Environmental Summit* (YES) in Chistochina, focusing on sustainable living. Last year's event at Gulkana featured recycling, electronic waste, cultural awareness, and other conservation issues through games, hikes, puppet shows and craft activities.

Through community trail projects, the Copper Valley Development Association (CVDA) has facilitated support from WISE, KLSWCD, NPS and BLM, local schools, the state of Alaska and private businesses to complete the projects.

The focus of these efforts has involved students creating interpretive signs along trails near Glennallen and Kenny Lake Schools, with a future project in Copper Center.

While students hike, draw, research and write, they are developing a heightened understanding of *The Forest in Our Backyard*. The trail projects foster both environmental and vocational education, and teachers once mentioned that even if the signs had never been produced, the process of their development had been an invaluable educational success.



Above: WISE volunteer Paul Boos with Glennallen School students on interpretive hike. Top Right: NPS Education Specialist Glenn Hart leading students on a hike during 2008 YES Summit. Photo by Vic Bruss. Middle Right: Lin Perry-Plake of AK Fish and Game during a field trip to their offices. Bottom Right: Kenny Lake students Adrina Knutson and Dana Betts painting a trailhead sign. Photos courtesy CVDA.

Students now have an ownership in the trail and interpretive information and a connection to their *Outdoor Classroom*. CVDA recently received the *Outstanding Youth Involvement Award* for the Kenny Lake School Trail Project from the Pacific Rim Association of RC&D Councils.

Volunteerism is an important part of life in the Copper Valley, and residents rely on volunteers to keep the libraries open, the fire trucks running and the ambulance showing up when you call 911. Field trips organized by CVDA staff educate the students about how our community works. CVDA's efforts involve students where possible in their projects, with EarthTeam Volunteers working on trail construction and sign installation, abandoned car project clean up and inventory, aluminum can round-ups, fairground preparation and recycling efforts.

CVDA is currently administering a Youth Adult Partnership program, partnering with BLM, NPS and UAF Cooperative Extension Service. Through the umbrella of the 4H program, students are learning about All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) safety and how to teach other youth about safety and environmental concerns with ATV use. 4H club members recently

presented a program at WISE's *Earth Discovery Day* this spring, teaching best practices to sustain trails, respect other users and the environment while riding ATVs.

All of these entities and individuals work together for many of these youth-oriented activities and projects, helping with event planning, logistics, outreach and resources. The Copper Valley is an excellent example of how communities can pool resources and leverage funds to educate and engage the youth in our communities.

Many projects for our youth could not have been completed without these partnerships and the dedication of staff and volunteers.

These programs also generate interest in our youth to pursue careers in the natural resources. Visit [coppervalley.org](http://coppervalley.org) for links to these projects and organizations.

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