

WISE Programs Encourage Wise Decisions

The Wrangell Institute for Science and Environment (WISE) has a mission to provide science and environmental education to all age groups, resources for learning, and support for scientific research.

Their vision is to share the natural world of the Copper River Basin and to provide scientific, environmental education, and research services to all age groups from children to seniors and to instill people with a sense of awe, connectedness, and sacred feeling for the place they live.

In 1998, WISE was just an idea; the brainchild of Suzanne McCarthy and Janelle Eklund because they felt there was a lack of environmental education in the Basin. They soon found people with similar ideas and the organization received non-profit 501(c)(3) status in 2002, with its final determination in 2006. The organization is run by Executive Director, Bruce James, and has a ten person Board of Directors who are hand-picked for the special skills they can bring to the organization. Board members have a wide variety of backgrounds and experience, including parks, tourism and recreation, fisheries biology, education, and technical and website design. Having a board that can contribute is critical to the success of WISE, especially considering Mr. James is the only staff member.

The organization's programs are funded through membership dues, partner organizations, individual donations, corporate donations, and for-profit nature hiking tours. WISE is very successful at finding partners with mission synergy. Much of the funding is program specific and funded by the partners who have an



Above: Coby, a 3rd grade student from Glennallen, is on the microscope checking out a puffball. Bottom Left: Summer camp participants at the Long Lake weir studying aquatic ecology. Photos courtesy of WISE.

interest in seeing the program succeed. They currently work with over 22 partners on various projects. WISE also looks for grants from the state of Alaska when a project or program meets the requirements.

WISE has a variety of environmental programs for youth and adults. They work with the schools on Earth Discovery Day and Changing Seasons, they have taught interpretation techniques to students for developing interpretive trails near their schools, and have a variety of other in-school programs.

Changing Seasons takes place in the fall for second and third grade students. The focus is on the ways the natural world and humans are affected by the approach of winter. Students head outside and learn about weather, animal and plant changes and how all things are connected.

Earth Discovery Day focuses on fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students. Subjects for the learning stations include aging fish, recycling, live bird presentations, map and compass, Leave No Trace, plant identification, and watershed runoff. This program, as well as Changing Seasons, is designed to reinforce a student's knowledge of ecological principles. According to Bruce, "by applying the collection and analysis of scientific data as well as using observation skills, students gain a stewardship ethic based on scientific understanding and increased awareness of the local environment".

WISE has a variety of other in-school programs they offer to the students, typically at the request of the teacher. They are able to react to special requests as long as they have the time and are able to develop a good program. These requests often turn into annual programs.

WISE also has a variety of summer programs. Two-day summer camps, focusing on aquatic ecology and the life cycle of salmon are held twice each year. This camp is an excellent way to not only learn about the environment, but the career path and opportunities of a fisheries biologist.

Another hugely successful summer program is the Copper River Stewardship Program; a ten day watershed exploration program, complete with a four to five day raft trip, available to ten high school students. Formerly available to only students in the Copper River Basin and the Copper River Delta, this year participation was open to students in Valdez and Anchorage. Students apply by writing an essay and are selected based on criteria developed by WISE and its partners.

Students that go through the program learn about watershed dynamics and experience a sense of stewardship. Topics such as preservation and conservation of river resources are addressed. WISE believes that being ‘in the resource’ allows students to learn hands-on and gives them the knowledge to make wise decisions and consider future impacts as they become adult leaders.

Keaton Shepherd, one of the past participants of the program and student from Kenny Lake School, had this to say in an essay written about his experience, “While I was on the river, I felt an increased awareness and connection with the world. The campfire messages stirred emotions deep within me, feelings that maybe we take too much and give too little. It is this gift of consciousness that I would like to share with those around me, because I know that all humans are influenced by other humans. Thus, all change must begin within the self.”

Recently, WISE has expanded their programs to reach both of CVEA’s districts. In 2009, WISE, working with PWSCC, began offering a program similar to Earth Discovery Day in Valdez. It was very popular and will be returning again this year. WISE will also offer a gold panning program in Valdez during the upcoming Gold Rush Days celebration in August.

WISE is not just for youth. They offer the Leave No Trace program and public lecture series for adults as well. Leave No Trace is dedicated to promoting and inspiring responsible outdoor recreation through education, research and partnerships. Adults are invited to attend public lectures on environmental and scientific topics that are given by field experts.

Finally, WISE raises funding and awareness of the area through Copper River Country Nature Tours sold through Princess Copper River Wilderness Lodge to their



Top: 2009 Copper River Stewardship Program participants pose for a photo near Childs Glacier. Above: Naturalist Karen Walker giving Copper River Country Nature Tour to guests of the Princess Copper River Wilderness Lodge. Photos courtesy of WISE.

guests throughout the summer. This tour is a four hour guided program through the scenic Copper River Valley, taking them through an undisturbed portion of the boreal forest and experiencing the land much as it was thousands of years ago.

WISE feels strongly that these and other programs are fulfilling their mission of bringing environmental awareness and education to the communities they serve. While continuing the successful programs they have in place, WISE is now looking for opportunities to add programs that have more of a focus on science.

They believe youth will benefit from the same hands-on approach to scientific research and experimentation that they receive from WISE environmental programs. WISE is working towards developing a local science fair and one day, possibly, a mobile science lab. The organization is currently looking for partners to help them achieve these goals.

Additional information on WISE can be found at www.wise-edu.org or by emailing bjames@wise-edu.org. ■