



## Exploring Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts of Wisconsin Environmental Education Centers

Shannon Columb, Quentien Tyra,  
and Kendra Liddicoat

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**Stevens Point**





# Executive Summary

Over the past four years, the Wisconsin Association for Environmental Education (WAE) has engaged in a focused effort to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in its organization, its member organizations, and environmental education in Wisconsin. The primary goal of this research study was to take a deeper look at what Wisconsin environmental education organizations are doing and tell those stories on the WAE website and elsewhere.

Five illustrative case studies were selected through a short survey sent to a list of 137 individuals who had participated in WAE professional development related to equity and inclusion or who represented organizational members of WAE. The main data source was interviews with senior staff at each study site. Interview questions focused on current efforts, the impetus behind equity and inclusion initiatives, ongoing challenges, and valued partners in this work. The interviews were digitally recorded and analyzed for emergent themes. The researchers then worked together to write case study summaries for each site to be shared on the WAE website. Similarities between sites included the importance of staff commitment in moving the organization forward, financial challenges as non-profit organizations with multiple priorities, and the importance of partner organizations that already provide services to diverse communities. The case studies are being shared WAE to inspire equity and inclusion work across the state.

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# Aldo Leopold Nature Center

The Aldo Leopold Nature Center, located in Monona, Wisconsin, is an active member of the Dane County community, offering a wide range of programs on its 20 acres of forest, wetland, prairie, and beyond. After over 20 years of working toward their mission, in the words of Aldo Leopold, “to teach the student to see the land, understand what he sees, and enjoy what he understands,” the board and staff of Aldo Leopold Nature Center decided in 2016 it was time to regroup and engage in a strategic planning process. Following almost two years of assessments, the nature center began to reorganize. They re-wrote their mission statement which is now: “to engage and educate current and future generations, empowering them to respect, protect and enjoy the natural world,” and developed new vision statements with a renewed focus on emphasizing that nature is for everyone. One of the main initiatives to come out of this process was an effort to increase Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access (IDEA). The nature center had realized how similar the faces and backgrounds of the organization’s workforce and stakeholders were. Recognizing how diverse their audience could and should be, Aldo Leopold Nature Center began focused work to increase access to the outdoors for all people.

Having a variety of valued partners has helped Aldo Leopold Nature Center with attaining their goals of increased accessibility. The Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) and community centers collaborate with the nature center for educational opportunities. Donors and corporate partners are supportive because they “enjoy the idea of diversification,” according to Brenna Holzhauer, Director of Operations and Strategic Initiatives at Aldo Leopold Nature Center. Lastly, community members are more responsive and interested as they learn more about the programs and accessibility options available.

One of Aldo Leopold Nature Center’s most significant new initiatives was opening a nature preschool in September 2019. The goal was to make this preschool very accessible. The curriculum taught at the preschool is culturally sensitive and child driven. To help with financial accessibility, tuition is on a sliding scale based on family income. In addition, there are

scholarships available for full or partial funding. Physical accessibility was also carefully considered. The preschool is housed in a remodeled portion of the original campus, so the necessary retrofitting put the Aldo Leopold Nature Center in a position to make other necessary improvements. Since this is a nature center, the design could not just have pavement everywhere without sacrificing the aesthetics of nature. However, some pervious and impervious surfaces have been added to enable students and visitors who use wheelchairs to more easily get around the nature center and enjoy the outdoor space. The Aldo Leopold Nature Center also added ramps where possible to improve entry into the building and access to the outdoors.



Through the renovation, the Aldo Leopold Nature Center was able to add its first two gender-neutral family bathrooms. This required space and plumbing to be maneuvered, as well as new signage. Signage turned out to be a larger project than expected. There were no signs available that best communicated the functional and symbolic messages the staff wanted to convey. Since Cara Erickson, Marketing and Communications Manager, has a background in design, she was able to design signs with symbols, verbiage, and braille text that encompass that the bathrooms are for anyone.

Adding preferred pronouns in email signatures has been another effort to increase inclusivity. Although this change seemed simple enough, it opened the door for deeper conversations about ally-ship. Initially, some staff members did not understand the value of this addition and did not feel able to explain to others why pronouns were listed. Including pronouns is now embraced by most staff but remains optional. The nature center also updated its participant database system to remove the required fields for binary gender options. Registration forms no longer ask for an individual's sex and now ask for preferred gender pronouns. Rosters are updated for the preferred pronouns of the child as well. This has been an effective and well-received change for the organization.

Efforts to become more inclusive are not restricted to facilities and programs located on site. According to Holzhauer, two of the greatest points of pride to emerge from this focus on IDEA are the "Wonder Bugs On the Road" program and the Community Access Fund. "Wonder Bugs" is a one-hour and fifteen-minute program for preschool-aged children and their parents. This popular on-site program has been expanded "on the road" after



the organization recognized a need to make the program more accessible to the community, especially where there was lacking transportation and awareness of the nature center's programs. Since there are non-English speaking participants, Aldo Leopold Nature Center partners with educators from MMSD and community centers throughout Madison to offer language assistance in Spanish, Hmong, and other native languages. Aldo Leopold Nature Center has also been looking into hiring individuals who are fluent in other languages and reaching out to the community for additional cultural and language resources. Improving access to "Wonder Bugs" helps the organization show that they want to meet people where they are and that an individual doesn't have to leave their neighborhood to experience the outdoors.



The Community Access Fund is Aldo Leopold Nature Center's strongest source of financial accessibility, helping to bring environmental education to children and families, who – for whatever reason – might not otherwise have access. It is an umbrella fund that raises money to create more accessible programming and related operational initiatives. This fund shows the community that Aldo Leopold Nature Center is trying to be inclusive even in a financial sense. The Community Access Fund helps support "Wonder Bugs On the Road", scholarships for summer camp, and vacation day programming; and even diversification in marketing materials created for a diverse audience. Setting aside some funds for the Community Access Fund happens when planning the year's budget as well as from holding specific fundraising blitzes throughout the year. Other sources of funds come from grants, corporate donors, individual donors, and program fees. The Community Access Fund has allowed the nature center to remove attendance fees from many of its programs, making them more accessible to a wider audience.

Aldo Leopold Nature Center has had a fair share of challenges and barriers standing in the way of their implementations. Since the nature center is a nonprofit, staffing and funding are spread very thin. A lack of funding has prevented some of their ideas from being carried out as quickly and comprehensively as the organization would like. Due to resource pressures, prioritizing is essential – especially since enacting strategic change takes time and effort and being spread thin can make it easy for staff members to default to business as usual.

The Aldo Leopold Nature Center will continue to require resources in order to continue efforts towards diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is crucial to have organizational buy-in and community support in order to keep moving these types of initiatives forward. The organization will need more funding to ensure that they are able to make improvements to infrastructure, as well as continue to provide free or low-cost programming. More time for evaluation and planning, professional development and networking, as well as time for partners to introduce the nature center to new audiences will be necessary. Furthermore, having adequate staffing and resources, support from the board, and awareness and understanding from the community will always be important to operations at the nature center.



Written by Quentien Tyra. Photos courtesy of Aldo Leopold Nature Center.



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Since 1975, the Central Wisconsin Environmental Station, CWES, has served as an important teaching and learning center for people of all ages interested in the environment. The 240-acre property, which overlooks Sunset Lake in Central Wisconsin, is a field station of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Throughout the school year, UWSP environmental education/interpretation students teach environmental education to visiting school groups, as part of practicum in their final semester. During the summer, CWES offers summer camp for youth and is also a host site for conferences, workshops, and trainings throughout the year. In the past several years, CWES has been proactive in improving its equity and inclusivity to wider, more diverse audiences.

Tom Quinn, Director of CWES, says staff are the driving force of the organization's efforts towards becoming more inclusive. The organization is working harder to hire individuals from diverse backgrounds. For example, CWES has begun posting job listings in locations that will reach a diverse audience. In the past, CWES has hired candidates with autism or who identify with a different gender than assigned; the organization aspires to continue diversifying its staff. This past summer, CWES hired a garden intern with a visual impairment who taught garden education to campers. "We want to have more staff that demonstrate to youth that if you have an impairment or come from a diverse background it doesn't have to impede on what you do," said Quinn.

CWES also hosts a variety of events that reach a wider audience. For the past three summers, CWES has partnered with the Milwaukee-based organization, Diverse and Resilient to offer a three-day camp for LGBTQ+ youth, ages 14 to 20 from around the state. The camp, called The Wisconsin Youth Great O.U.T.doors Institute,





focuses on leadership development and education about health messages that participants can bring back to their communities. In preparation for the camp, CWES changes all bathroom signs to be gender-neutral, and staff is trained on LGBTQ+ topics. In the past, CWES also hosted the Multicultural Leadership Conference, which invited high-school students to learn about diversity and inclusion efforts at UW-Stevens Point and to gain positive outdoor experience.

The environmental center does have a fair share of challenges and barriers that have proven antagonist towards their ability to keep up with demand for change. Out of all the potential barriers, “financials [are] the biggest constraint,” said Quinn. This constraint primarily affects establishing permanent gender-neutral bathrooms and improving accessibility. A woodchipper, recently purchased by the on-site charter school, will aid in defining trails that wind through the 240 acres of uneven, often steep, wooded terrain.

*“I don’t feel like CWES is completely there in terms of equity and inclusion, but we are aware of it and we are trying to be more inclusive and embrace more diverse audiences.”*

Increased support financially and from valued partners will allow CWES to continue improving their outreach for position openings, programs, and infrastructure redevelopment. Additional support from the university

would speed up projects like creating permanent gender-neutral bathrooms. According to Quinn, the organization runs primarily on program revenue and does not rely on UW-Stevens Point for infrastructural improvements. CWES would also benefit from increased assistance from Human Resources at the university to help with broader audience promotion for position openings. Quinn notes that using avenues for marketing and posting to a broader, more diverse audience costs money. Nevertheless, CWES understands that this is one of the costs for promoting diversity, equity and inclusion and is willing to continue their efforts.

Professional development from WAEE and NAAEE has encouraged continued efforts and success towards diversity, equity, and inclusion for the environmental center. CWES supports its staff and graduate students to attend events offered by these organizations that include seminars and workshops on diversity and inclusion. Quinn has seen how attending professional development events benefits his organization’s advancements in diversity, equity,





and inclusion. “You go to a session and it opens your eyes to new ideas,” said Quinn in describing the training and application of gender pronouns at a professional development event.

Quinn understands there is still much work to be done for diversity, equity, and inclusion in his organization, but is certain an impact is being made at CWES. “I don’t feel like CWES is completely there in terms of equity and inclusion, but we are aware of it and we are trying to be more inclusive and embrace more diverse audiences,” said Quinn, “...everybody says, ‘we’re in Central Wisconsin, we are lacking in diversity’, but I disagree because there’s all sorts of diversity and I do think we are serving a lot of different populations. It’s not just skin color or sexual orientation, I think there’s a lot of ways to be more aware,” said Quinn.

Written by Shannon Columb and Quentien Tyra. Photos courtesy of CWES.



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With its 379 acres of wilderness surrounding the Milwaukee River, Riveredge Nature Center (Riveredge) has been providing environmental education to people of all ages in Southeastern Wisconsin for over 50 years, making it one of the largest and oldest nature centers in the region. The center, which also focuses on conservation and research, is open to the public and hosts field trips for local schools, homeschool students, families, and the newly opened Riveredge Outdoor Learning Elementary School. With a diverse audience ranging from rural communities to inner-city Milwaukee, Riveredge strives to be inclusive and equitable.

The impetus for these efforts stems from Riveredge staff, whose motivation creates awareness of different techniques, tools, and attitudes effective for inclusivity in teaching environmental education. For example, Riveredge has several sensory bins and toys to help students with sensory sensitivity be more focused on lessons. The idea to purchase these adaptive tools came from observations

**“We want everyone to see that they belong outdoors.”**

made by an Inclusion & Accessibility Intern during winter 2017 who noticed, through her own sensory processing disorder, opportunities to further engage students with cognitive disabilities. Riveredge benefits from hiring staff with differing abilities and backgrounds who bring new perspectives to the organization. Julie Dickson, Administrative Assistant for Education and Membership, uses a wheelchair and requested handrails be installed on the ramp to the visitor center. The handrails will benefit everyone, with or without a mobility impairment, all-year round and especially during the winter months. They are expected to be installed in spring 2020. As of November 2019, Riveredge has automatic front doors with push plates which give more people the opportunity to independently access the visitor center.

Much of Riveredge’s drive for becoming more inclusive and equitable comes from professional development events. The organization budgets for



staff to attend Wisconsin Association for Environmental Education (WAE), National Association for Interpretation (NAI), and North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) conferences to present, network, and learn. These experiences push the organization to keep working towards diversity, equity, and inclusion, giving staff new ideas and inspiration. After attending a Community Engagement Workshop at the 2018 NAAEE conference in Spokane, Washington, Carly Hintz, Associate Director of Education at Riveredge, was able to bring the skills and knowledge she obtained back to the nature center. “[It] shifted our way of thinking and way of planning programs,” said Hintz.



Successful efforts also derive from the valuable partnerships Riveredge creates with other individuals and organizations through attending conferences. After a Riveredge employee attended a session about diversity led by August Ball, an advocate for social justice and founder of Cream City Conservation, at the 2018 WAE Winter Workshop, the organization contracted Ball to lead a training at a staff retreat in January 2019.

Riveredge is working to secure grant funding to organize another diversity training with Ball. These opportunities to receive training in diversity, equity, and inclusion are a success Riveredge is proud of and looks forward to continuing.

Other partners to Riveredge allow the nature center to succeed in its efforts of reaching a more diverse audience. A recent partnership with the Madison-based organization, Access Ability Wisconsin, has allowed Riveredge to reach a new demographic. Access Ability Wisconsin provides all-terrain outdoor wheelchairs, known as Action Trackchairs, for individuals to rent free of charge. This past summer, Riveredge was granted the opportunity to be a host site for one of the chairs, making it the first Trackchair located in Southeastern Wisconsin. Individuals can use the chair on-site or off-site for any amount of time. One man who rented the chair through Riveredge used it to hunt out west and harvested three antelope. In response to the chair's overwhelming popularity, Riveredge will likely be hosting a second Trackchair starting in spring 2020, specifically for on-site use by visitors and school groups.

The Urban Ecology Center and Lutheran Urban Ministries Network are valuable partners to Riveredge as well. For the past several years, Riveredge and the Urban Ecology Center have teamed up to bring students from Milwaukee to Riveredge to spend a full day in the Milwaukee River. The students learn how to assess the river's health, taking those skills to explore the river downstream in their own neighborhoods. In addition, Riveredge provides place-based education for students in four schools that are a part of the Lutheran Urban Ministries Network. Students come out once a year several times over the course of their academic career to gain hands-on experience with a variety of topics that relate to what they're learning in the classroom. These opportunities, among others, allow students from Milwaukee to experience outdoor education in a unique wilderness setting that they may not otherwise have experienced.

There are plenty of challenges and barriers Riveredge has encountered throughout its journey of becoming more inclusive towards diverse audiences. Like many nature centers, finances limit what Riveredge can pursue. "in order to make your space truly equitable, there is a high dollar amount associated with that," said Cassie Bauer, Family and Community Programs Manager for Riveredge. Lack of awareness and poor communication also challenges the nature center's efforts to accommodate visitors. Bauer explains that student needs can sometimes be misinterpreted or unknown by educators at Riveredge because needs are not always shared forthright by school staff or parents. "We're working to deepen the relationships we have with the teachers and schools that we work with to try and continuously communicate what their expectations are and [what they] and we should [expect]," said Hintz.

With an eager and motivated staff, Riveredge is continuously working towards diversity, equity, and inclusion. "We want everyone to see that they belong outdoors," said Bauer. The center is working on several on-going projects, such as updating its website to include accessibility information about trails and programs. There is still more that Riveredge wants to do, and by continuing to make and build partnerships, find funding to provide DEI trainings, and spread awareness of diversity, equity, and inclusion, Riveredge hopes to continue expanding their efforts.

Written by Shannon Columb. Photos courtesy of Riveredge Nature Center.



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# Wehr Nature Center

Wehr Nature Center's five miles of trails wind past Mallard Lake and through woodlands, an oak savanna, a prairie, and wetlands, giving visitors a chance to experience a diversity of natural communities right in a Milwaukee suburb. Inside the Nature Center building one can find educational exhibits, live animals, classroom spaces, and a spot for bird watching. Located in Whitnall Park, Wehr Nature Center is the result of a long-standing partnership between Milwaukee County Parks, the Friends of Wehr Nature Center, and the University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension.

Wehr Nature Center began its journey to become the most accessible nature center in Southeastern Wisconsin by changing its tagline from, "a place for all seasons," to "a place for all seasons, a place for everyone." Increasing physical accessibility to better accommodate visitors with disabilities has been a ten-year project requiring leadership, commitment, and creativity. Accessible facilities at Wehr Nature Center now include an observation deck overlooking Mallard Lake, a 0.3 mile boardwalk trail, a fire pit and amphitheater, a new classroom, a new pier, and a large family restroom.



The amphitheater, one of the first renovations tackled, now has multiple accessible features. All rows of seating and the stage can be accessed ramps. At the top of the amphitheater, there is a flat space with movable chairs available for individuals who use wheelchairs, their companions, and anyone who is not comfortable walking on the inclined paths. The amphitheater and accompanying firepit are within easy walking or driving distance over permeable pavers from the main parking lot and Nature Center. From the amphitheater, visitors can continue on to the accessible boardwalk trail.

According to Emily Brown, accessibility and inclusion coordinator and naturalist, the bathrooms have posed one of the greatest barriers to becoming a more accessible and inclusive facility. Renovating the existing restrooms would have required extending the building and other significant construction. The new accessible family restroom is an example of how director Deb McRae's leadership and the commitment of Friends of Wehr Nature Center were essential to accomplishing the task in a creative way over



an extended time. A bathroom is not the easiest project to raise money for! Turning the maintenance closet into a new, all-gender family restroom with an adult changing table solved multiple problems and made the donated funds go farther. And the new bathroom is conveniently located near the new accessible classroom that was created out of the former gift shop.

Inclusion efforts at Wehr Nature Center are not only about physical accessibility. The website and a new registration form encourage visitors to request accommodations and contact Emily Brown with questions. Technology like a camera to project images from a microscope on to a large screen TV and a link to the AIRA app for people who are blind or have low vision make learning at Wehr Nature Center easier for all. Offering free and low-cost programs also make Wehr Nature Center more accessible to members of the local community.

One of the most remarkable features of Wehr Nature Center is the number of volunteers involved in taking care of the accessible facilities, leading programs, and raising funds. Over 500 volunteers contribute their time and energy every year! They augment the valuable support provided by



Milwaukee County Parks and the University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension and make extra projects possible. With a limited budget and small staff, Wehr Nature Center is continually challenged to fulfill its mission, expand its reach, and meet the needs of a diverse community.

When asked how involvement with the Wisconsin Association for Environmental Education (WAE) has supported inclusivity efforts at Wehr Nature Center, Emily Brown highlighted the importance of learning and forging connections with others passionate about environmental education and inclusion. Through WAE, she has been able to learn of new resources, access grant dollars, attend conferences, present research, bring professional development to colleagues and volunteers, and share the success story of Wehr Nature Center becoming “a place for everyone.”

Written by Quentien Tyra and Kendra Liddicoat.  
Photos courtesy of Wehr Nature Center and Brian Barringer.



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Located near the Wisconsin-Illinois border, a few miles outside of Beloit, Welty Environmental Center (Welty) strives to educate children, families, and community members about the natural world surrounding them. The organization was founded in 1999 and was originally located at Beckmann Mill County Park. In 2015, the City of Beloit offered Welty Environmental Center a space previously owned by Badgerland Girl Scouts at the Big Hill Center. The center is part of a city park that spans 190 acres and includes forest, prairie, and river habitat useful for a wide variety of environmental education lessons.

Beloit is a diverse community, with 68% of the school district comprised of students of minority backgrounds. By working towards diversity, equity, and inclusion, Welty Environmental Center is pursuing their mission of providing environmental education to the community, which allows residents to make informed decisions about their natural resources. The nature center offers a variety of programs, both on-site and off-site, for people of all ages. Through partnering with the school district and community organizations, Welty Environmental Center reaches underserved crowds that are unable to visit their location due to transportation and financial constraints.



Brenda Plakans, Executive Director of Welty, believes that being seen as a partner is a success for the organization. Welty Environmental Center has several valuable partners that have led to their success in reaching diverse audiences. The center partners with the School District of Beloit, Head Start, and Even Start to deliver environmental education to underserved individuals. Twice a week, Aaron Wilson, Program Director at Welty, visits Todd Elementary and Fruzen Intermediate to provide environmental



education to students enrolled in afterschool enrichment through the use of educational games and hands-on experiences. Field trips are also held at Welty for students in 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Trips focus on topics such as forest ecology, history of fur trading in south central Wisconsin, and geology. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade field trips are led by high schoolers taking ecology classes at Beloit Memorial.

Welty also provides environmental education to preschoolers enrolled in Head Start as well as families learning English as their second language who are enrolled in Even Start. During the school year, preschoolers from Head Start and preschoolers and parents from Even Start visit the nature center once a month. When at Welty, participants hike and learn about trees, habitats, natural cycles, survival needs of animals, and many other topics depending on the season. Both programs also include a literacy component, with each lesson involving reading a short book.

The center partners with several other organizations in the Beloit community and surrounding areas in order to reach wider, more diverse audiences. These partners include, Stateline Boys and Girls Club, Nature at the Confluence, Janesville School District and several others. Recently, Welty has partnered with Community Action, a non-profit organization that offers a program to prep teenagers who are primarily African American for decision making, leadership roles, and tertiary education. The program now includes an overnight stay at the center, where teenagers engage in environmental education. Other organizations, such as Alliant Energy and Dupont are valuable to Welty's success as well, by providing grants for the nature center to continue pursuing its mission.

**“It doesn’t matter who the kids are, or what demographic they belong to, they need to go outside, and they need to have more experiences at a younger age that are positive around environmental education.”**

Professional development events have also proven beneficial for the nature center as it works towards diversity, equity, and inclusion. In fall 2018, Plakans attended Queta Gonzalez's session about diversity and inclusion at the Wisconsin Association for Environmental Education conference at Upham Woods. Even though Plakans only attended the afternoon session, she found the experience very beneficial. “I loved the way she made us question our own assumptions in ways to approach the conversation in a gentle way,” said Plakans, “...she kept the room warm but still very straightforward about the mistakes people have made when trying to work with these groups.” Plakans uses a set of rules borrowed from Gonzalez that sets a framework of appropriate vocabulary to use during strategic planning

meetings with fellow colleagues. She also offers resources, such as Gonzalez's website, to colleagues so they can learn more about diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Though Welty has broadened their reach in the Beloit community, several challenges affect the organization's pursuit towards becoming more inclusive in offering environmental education. Finances and understaffing pose as obstacles for the nature center as it continues its efforts. Many of Welty's programs are led by Wilson or volunteers, but extra assistance for afterschool programming, field trips, and public programs would be ideal. Finances make it challenging for Welty to offer competitive employee benefits, such as a full-time position, higher pay, and insurance. This leads to difficulty in hiring people from diverse backgrounds.

Welty Environmental Center anticipates expanding their reach in the upcoming years. Wilson hopes to have several Welty volunteers attend training to become a Master Naturalist Trainer so the organization can recruit and train more volunteers to offer quality programs. He also hopes to acquire resources to redecorate the indoor educational area to include more images of diverse faces, to "make [the] space more friendly to someone who isn't necessarily inclined to visit a nature center." Wilson explains, "if they could see a face like theirs, I think that would go a long way." Welty Environmental Center will continue offering environmental education to the Beloit community, to inspiring people of all ages, especially children, to explore the wonders and understand the importance of the environment that surrounds them. "It doesn't matter who the kids are, or what demographic they belong to, they need to go outside, and they need to have more experiences at a younger age that are positive around environmental education," said Wilson.



Written by Shannon Columb. Photos courtesy of Welty Environmental Center.



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