



# Discovery Southeast

Hands-on Nature Education for Southeast Alaskans

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Randy Welsh

Wilderness Stewardship Performance Grant Program

National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance

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Dear Randy and NWSA Board Members,

Thank you for supporting a continuing education program for teachers in the Pleasant-Lemesurier-Inian Wilderness this summer. It was a great success that will echo across local classrooms for many years to come.

From June 12 to the 16<sup>th</sup> we brought a group of 16 local educators to the Inian Islands for an in-depth, hands-on educational seminar. Much of what we wanted to achieve was to give the participants on our trip the tools to bring the lessons back to their classrooms. We feel like those objectives were achieved. One of our specific goals was to make the participants feel comfortable in nature and connected to wilderness. While some participants were already comfortable outdoors, it was wonderful to watch others progress from their initial discomfort to an eventual ease in our wilderness setting. Another goal was specific natural history information about the area, which the teachers could bring back to their classroom. We had four seasoned educators on this trip, including one of the most knowledgeable local naturalists—the author of *The Nature of Southeast Alaska*—and the teachers left with lessons and applicable knowledge on everything from flora and fauna, to geology and glacial history. We also had specific sessions on the political history of designated Wilderness and the political history of this particular Wilderness Area. Finally, one of our goals was to engage various sectors of the community in the experience. We sought a diverse group of educators to take part in the experience, and then brought in several local organizations to take part. Probably one of the highlights was that an Alaska Native-owned and operated tour company handled our transportation via their whale watching boat. So, in addition to a gorgeous trip by boat around Admiralty Island, past Glacier Bay, and into the heart of the Wilderness Area, we spent hours watching humpback and orca whales on either end of the trip.

The participants had a strong experience. I'll share some of the comments from their evaluations:

*"Instruction through exploration: this is the way we need to approach it with our students—it was perfect."*

*"It gave me personal urgency to help give my students as many experiences outside as possible."*

*"I will be able to share scientific instruction...and my love for being in the wild has been truly enhanced."*

*"I wanted an experience in a new wilderness setting, personal renewal, and a chance to gain some knowledge/experience to share with my students. MISSION ACCOMPLISHED."*

*"I wanted to have an experience in the wilderness and learn content that I didn't already know. YES!! This happened each day. I loved it!"*

*"It demonstrated to us elementary teachers how one could incorporate a standards-based lesson into an outdoor experience."*

*"This is light-years beyond any other professional development experience I have had."*

*"Totally inspired me to work even in small ways to get my students outdoors on a regular basis."*

Education is one of the required Wilderness Stewardship Performance Standards, but it can be a challenging one to measure. In this case 16 educators became knowledgeable in the natural, cultural, and political history of the Pleasant-Lemesurier-Inian Wilderness. Assuming each has a classroom of 28 students, this year 448 students will engage in lessons educating them about Wilderness and local natural history—and those lessons will be repeated for many years. We believe that supporting these lessons among local educators has a meaningful effect on children across our region. We are not aware of any similar programs in the history of this particular Wilderness Area.

The partners in this project were the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance, US Forest Service, Inian Islands Institute, Icy Strait Whale Adventures, Alaska Glacier Seafoods, and the Hobbit Hole Lodge.

The major challenges we faced were costs—paying for seasoned instructors and finding reasonable transportation to a difficult-to-access wilderness area. The NWSA grant allowed us to afford the strong staff that we had, as well as a professionally planned trip. Partnership with a local tour operator, willing to provide half of the transportation costs in-kind, allowed us to find affordable transportation.

Our lessons for other organizations are twofold. First, on the administrative side, find financial and program sponsors who can provide a strong foundation for a strong program. Second, on the program side, have an open, un-rushed schedule. Perhaps one of the biggest barriers to opening ourselves to nature and wilderness is our chaotic lives and every-day pressures. We were careful not to pack lessons too tight, but rather to give teachers space to explore the topics. I think that allowed much deeper connections than tighter schedules of more information.

For media, an Alaska Public Radio reporter was going to be embedded with the expedition. However, she got sick and cancelled just before departure. Instead, we're now working on using teacher quotes and images to create a media piece to share, and will forward that to you once it's complete.

Thank you again for supporting what we believe was an excellent educational opportunity.

Sincerely,



Shawn Eisele  
Executive Director