

# NICODEMUS WILDERNESS PROJECT

## STRATEGIC PLAN

Authorized by the Board of Directors  
on November 16, 2007

### **Introduction:**

The Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ (Initiative) was originated by the Nicodemus Wilderness Project (NWP) during the spring of 2005. NWP has engaged over 2,000 youth volunteers in environmental stewardship projects worldwide since the commencement of the Initiative. We've reached out to young volunteers to provide individual mentoring, guidance, and support of their projects. We had no idea of the potential for success that this program had during its genesis but the past two years have proven truly remarkable. The use of web-based software has allowed us to streamline the Apprentice Ecologist web-publishing process so that we can focus efforts on volunteer contact, organization, project mentoring, follow-up, and appreciation efforts. Concurrent with these changes has been an increased interest and support from the media and funding agencies, respectively.

In early 2007, we had reached a point where we needed to strategically plan for the future direction of the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ and the Nicodemus Wilderness Project. We have followed the 20-step process as outlined in "Strategic Planning for Nonprofit Organizations" by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services to create our strategic plan. In creating this plan, we surveyed members, board members, volunteers, and donors to incorporate their thoughts about the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ and the Nicodemus Wilderness Project into this plan. We used the "SWOT" approach, where we had people provide input about the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats that characterize or affect our organization. This strategic plan incorporates all comments from internal (volunteer staff, board members) and external (members, volunteers, donors) stakeholders of the Nicodemus Wilderness Project. In this strategic plan, we seek to: 1) achieve a renewed focus on those programs that help to fulfill our mission, 2) direct our resources in a way that builds programs and makes a positive difference to youth and the environment, 3) produce a planning document that serves as a roadmap for the future direction of our programs.

**Background:**

The Nicodemus Wilderness Project (NWP) was established in 1999 by Robert K. Dudley (Director of NWP) in memory and honor of his grandfather, Robert F. Nicodemus (1908-1998). Founding board members (Robert K. Dudley, Yih-Ming Hsu, and Mary H. Dudley) received 501 (c)(3) nonprofit status for NWP in 2000 shortly after incorporating the organization in New Mexico, USA. The Nicodemus Wilderness Project was established because of the need for environmental restoration, stewardship, and protection of neglected public lands. One of NWP's primary activities has been the planning, organization, and facilitation of volunteer events that provide long-term environmental benefits for wildlife and natural areas. The original focus of NWP was to engage volunteers in community efforts that improve conditions for wildlife and the environment in New Mexico. Multiple environmental stewardship projects were conducted from 2000-2005 that helped to reduce widespread littering, graffiti, and the spread of nonnative vegetation on New Mexico's public lands, particularly surrounding its largest urban area (Albuquerque). On Earth Day (April 22) in 2005, the volunteer staff and board members of NWP launched the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ (Initiative). The goals of the Initiative are to elevate young people (including disadvantaged and at-risk youth) into leadership roles by engaging them in environmental stewardship projects, empower volunteers to rebuild the environmental and social well-being of our communities, and improve local living conditions for both citizens and wildlife. This program was initiated in an effort to engage youth volunteers across a broad geographic area (i.e., nationally and internationally) in projects to help protect the environment. Although it was several months before the first Apprentice Ecologist was certified, the program slowly began to grow and nearly 100 Apprentice Ecologists had completed projects by the end of 2005. The Initiative expanded in scope during 2006 and interest began to grow locally, nationally, and internationally. However, the time required in providing personal guidance and mentoring to volunteers, along with reviewing and publishing their project essays online, began to overwhelm NWP volunteer staff. A large amount of time was being devoted to creating webpages for projects conducted by Apprentice Ecologists. To streamline this process, new PHP-based software was acquired early in 2007 that largely automated the creation of NWP webpages. Additional efforts to automate volunteer certificate creation, database management, and donation processing have greatly reduced the time previously required to run the day-to-day operations of NWP. This efficiency has allowed a resurgent growth in the Initiative because of the additional time that can now be devoted to recruitment/mentoring of volunteers, program development, and community outreach. A \$500 scholarship fund was established to celebrate the two-year anniversary of the Initiative (Earth Day 2007); this honor will be awarded to the author

of the top Apprentice Ecologist project essay on an annual basis. As of 21 October 2007, 2,128 youth volunteers have become certified Apprentice Ecologists. They have collectively completed 10,037 hours of community environmental service, removed 33,515 pounds of trash from environment, planted 1,846 native trees, and restored 1,004 acres for wildlife.

**Mission:**

To protect wildlife and our environment and to build future conservation leaders by engaging youth in environmental stewardship projects worldwide.

**Vision:**

We envision that all young people will take personal responsibility and action toward protecting wildlife and the environment in their communities through NWP projects, and that these inspired youth volunteers will become the next generation of conservation leaders worldwide.

**Values:**

- Youth volunteers become leaders when they are given the freedom to identify and solve environmental problems on their own.
- Wildlife and the environment benefit from litter cleanups, native tree plantings, nonnative plant removal, and community recycling programs.
- Young people develop leadership skills and confidence, which helps them become responsible citizens, when they are empowered to make a difference.
- Stewardship of the environment, for the benefit of wildlife and communities, requires long-term commitment from concerned citizens.

**Results of the “SWOT” Analysis:**

- Strengths: The identified primary strengths of NWP included the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™, the use of the internet and software to reduce the volunteer staff time required to recruit volunteers and process/publish Apprentice Ecologist essays, an enthusiastic volunteer base, the passionate all-volunteer staff, the ability to obtain grants and form local community partnerships, the focus on youth as individuals who have the ability to make a positive impact to the environment and in

their own lives, and the ability to accomplish a lot with very little funding and no paid staff.

- Weaknesses: The identified primary weaknesses of NWP included the lack of funding for any paid staff positions, reliance on only volunteer staff for running the organization, lack of strategic planning in the past, and the relative lack of awareness/publicity about NWP or the Initiative.
- Opportunities: The identified primary opportunities available to NWP included connecting with local and national environmental organizations to partner on collaborative projects, capitalizing on the seemingly untapped and enthusiastic youth volunteer base who are interested in helping wildlife and the environment, establishing a reputation as one of the premier youth volunteering environmental groups, engaging underprivileged schools and children in NWP projects, encouraging local, national, and international dialogue between Apprentice Ecologists.
- Threats: The identified primary threats facing NWP included competition among nonprofit environmental organizations for limited funds and resources, the lack of any paid staff positions (could be an issue for long-term sustainability), the focus of developing nations on economic improvement over environmental stewardship, prejudice toward environmental groups, political policies and government cutbacks of funding to environmental groups and issues, and the suburbanization of communities with attendant focus on playing indoors by kids.

### **Core Strategies and Direction:**

***Strategy 1.*** Provide environmental stewardship opportunities in the greater Albuquerque, NM area as part of national volunteering days.

Direction ⇒ Group projects have been held to engage volunteers of all ages in trash cleanup, graffiti removal, native vegetation planting, nonnative vegetation removal, and trail building/restoration projects. While NWP and the community recognize the importance of these projects, we feel a need to incorporate this work into the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™. We will continue conducting large-scale projects on national volunteering days (e.g., National Trails Day, Make a Difference Day etc.), but also to

include more youth groups and provide opportunities for young people to become certified Apprentice Ecologists as part of these projects.

**Strategy 2.** Provide opportunities for youth to become Apprentice Ecologists in New Mexico.

Direction ⇒ Local support and funding of the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ has exceeded expectations. We have been able to engage many youth volunteers in independent and group projects throughout the greater Albuquerque, NM area, but would like to expand our current outreach efforts. Recent funding also will allow us to build the local capacity of the program by increasing project supplies, educational materials, volunteer appreciation incentives, and volunteer mentoring efforts. Our goals are to actively bring this program to larger numbers of 1) students within New Mexico schools, 2) youth volunteers already involved with local governmental agencies (e.g., City of Albuquerque, Open Space Division), and 3) youth participants of other local NGO programs (e.g., Big Brothers - Big Sisters, Scouts, Roots and Shoots etc.).

**Strategy 3.** Provide opportunities for youth to become Apprentice Ecologists both nationally and internationally.

Direction ⇒ The interest in and response to the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ quickly spread beyond the borders of New Mexico and has now become a program without geographical limits. However, the funding for the national and international components of the Initiative have not yet reached a level where the program can be expanded beyond its current capacity. While interest is seemingly unlimited, we've had to limit the availability of the program to a level that can be handled by current funding and volunteer staffing resources. It is not feasible to expand the current national and international program beyond its current capacity because of limited financial resources.

**Strategy 4.** Do not expand our services beyond NWP youth-focused volunteer environmental stewardship projects.

Direction ⇒ We have been approached by other international NGO's to expand our services to include providing small grants and programmatic advice/assistance. While we have provided some volunteer supplies for projects overseas, the long-term efficacy of this strategy is limited. At the current time, it is not feasible for NWP to support the work of other established youth-focused NGO's except through their participation in the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™.

**Strategy 5.** Invest in our capacity to support the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™, especially in terms of program infrastructure and staffing.

Direction ⇒ The growth of the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ has already resulted in numerous efforts to improve programmatic efficiency and reduce costs. In addition to

these changes, it is also recognized that financial resources must be directed toward building the infrastructure of the program. There is a need to increase the development and distribution of Apprentice Ecologist educational/promotional materials, expand community outreach efforts, and provide more opportunities for media coverage. While volunteers have provided the labor force behind all NWP programs, it is recognized that a permanent program staff position needs to be funded. Current programmatic support has not yet reached a level where this is financially possible, but it is the goal of NWP to reach this level of funding in the near future.

### **Goals, Objectives, and Priorities:**

**Goal 1.** To increase participation by kids and teens (including disadvantaged and at-risk youth) in NWP environmental stewardship projects in the greater Albuquerque, NM area as part of national volunteering days.

#### Objectives:

- Pursue individual, corporate, foundational, and governmental funding for a permanent NWP program staff position.
- Recruit youth for NWP projects so that this age-group comprises at least 50% of all participants in local environmental stewardship projects.
- Maintain family-oriented nature of projects by encouraging participation by parents, grandparents, and siblings.
- Increase awareness of events by posting at all trailheads and at the City of Albuquerque, Open Space Division visitor center, and by distributing to local youth groups and within Albuquerque schools.
- Increase participation so that all task-specific projects for a particular event are filled with the targeted number of volunteers.

**Goal 2.** To increase participation by kids and teens (including disadvantaged and at-risk youth) in NWP's Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ in New Mexico.

#### Objectives:

- Pursue individual, corporate, foundational, and governmental funding for a permanent NWP program staff position.
- Certify 100 Apprentice Ecologists in New Mexico in 2008.
- Increase number of project participants by 10% per year over the next five years.
- Integrate Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ as part of community service or extra credit programs within New Mexico schools.

**Goal 3.** To increase participation by kids and teens (including disadvantaged and at-risk youth) in NWP's Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ both nationally and internationally.

Objectives:

- Pursue individual, corporate, foundational, and governmental funding for a permanent NWP program staff position.
- Certify 250 Apprentice Ecologists nationally/internationally in 2008.
- Increase number of participants by 10% per year over the next five years.
- Integrate Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ as part of community service or extra credit programs within schools.

**Goal 4.** To increase the visibility of NWP and the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ in New Mexico and also nationally and internationally.

Objectives:

- Pursue individual, corporate, foundational, and governmental funding for a permanent NWP program staff position.
- Increase dollar amount and number of scholarships; publicize availability.
- Distribute NWP Apprentice Ecologist flier and brochure widely (to volunteers, in mailings, drop-off locations, schools, libraries, stores etc.).
- Pursue inclusion of NWP related stories in local and national printed articles.
- Expand the scope and reach of online ads as provided by a grant from Google Ads.
- Increase the number of regions covered and frequency of re-postings for VolunteerMatch recruiting efforts.
- Send out the NWP eNewsletter on a quarterly basis.
- Conduct an annual campaign fundraiser, which includes program goals (e.g., growth, staff, scholarship), for NWP and the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™.

**Administrative Priorities:**

- Acquire resources to create a permanent NWP program staff position.
- \*\*An NWP program endowment of \$300,000 will provide adequate funding for one permanent staff position in perpetuity.
- Network with other local, national, and international environmental nonprofits.
- Maintain strong volunteer-based structure within NWP.
- Focus resources on building the visibility of NWP and the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™.
- Continue efforts to automate the repetitive programmatic tasks of NWP.
- Maintain strong standards of accountability and meet all requirements of the BBB Wise Giving Alliance.

**Financial Priorities:**

- Increasing the current level of funding so that a paid staff person could be hired.
- Keeping costs as low as possible and increasing overall assets.

**Governance Priorities:**

- Maintaining regular dialogue with internal and external stakeholders of NWP and encouraging their active participation as volunteers and donors.