



## USDA Forest Service Connecting Kids in the Woods to Wilderness Briefing Paper

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*“Our most important resource in this country is not forests, vital as they are. It is not water, although life itself would cease to exist without it. It is people. The challenges of climate change and looming water shortages will not be resolved in a few years. It will take generations. Today’s children—and theirs—will need to be able to take the baton and continue the race. For that, they will need a full understanding of why forests are so valuable, along with a strong land ethic. It is our job to give them both.”*

— **Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell**

Wilderness provides unique opportunities to re-connect kids (and communities) to the national forests.

- The National Wilderness Preservation System, with over 35 million acres of designated wilderness within the national forests, offers abundant opportunities for children to reconnect with nature away from the distracting influences of technology, to experience the solitude of open spaces, and to overcome challenge and risk to build self-reliance.
- Children who have direct experience with these wild places develop life-long ties that allow them to see the effects life-style choices have on places they love. Consequently, they are more likely to be informed citizens who understand and support conservation and wilderness.
- Respect and care for wild lands is taught through wilderness education programs. Examples include projects funded with “More Kids in the Woods” grants, partnerships with outfitters who provide backcountry educational experiences to underserved urban youth, and conservation education/wilderness education positions within the agency.

### **There are a number of important opportunities for expanding the role of wilderness in connecting kids to the woods.**

- Identify opportunities and integrate wilderness into the broader Kids in the Woods emphasis area strategies, briefing papers, and program implementation.
  - Insert wilderness needs and actions lists into all program planning and products
  - Improve the Kids in the Woods webpage wilderness section
- Continue the “More Kids in the Woods” grant programs with an emphasis to include wilderness awareness and ethics education along with service projects. Insure awareness of grant program among wilderness managers and educators

- Develop strategies to encourage new and existing outfitters whose mission is to provide backcountry educational experiences to underserved youth
  - Emphasize need and highlight partnership options with outfitter/guides.
  - Provide national guidance to prioritize authorizations of use days.
- Prioritize wilderness education as part of the conservation education program.
  - Utilize existing and new partners to teach respect and care for wild places.
  - Integrate wilderness education into conservation education strategy and programs.