

# NICODEMUS WILDERNESS PROJECT

## STRATEGIC PLAN

Authorized by the Board of Directors

on 22 April 2011

### **Introduction:**

The Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ (Initiative) was originated by the Nicodemus Wilderness Project during the spring of 2005. The Nicodemus Wilderness Project has engaged thousands of 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 the Initiative had during its genesis but the past five 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.

In early 2007, we had reached a point where we needed to strategically plan for the future direction of the Nicodemus Wilderness Project and the Initiative. We 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 Initiative and the Nicodemus Wilderness Project into this plan. We used the "SWOT" approach, where we used people's input to determine 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, and 3) produce a planning document that serves as a roadmap for the future direction of our programs. In this document, we present a revised version of our original strategic plan (November 16, 2007). This new plan provides more detail about our core strategies and direction in addition to incorporating our most current programmatic goals, strategic objectives, activities, responsibilities, materials/resources, and measures of success. Special thanks are extended to Timothy Voskuil (PNM Resources) for his assistance in developing this new strategic plan.

**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, NWP launched the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ (Initiative). The goals of the Initiative are to elevate young people (including disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers) 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. 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 Apprentice Ecologist webpages. Additional efforts to automate volunteer certificate creation, database management, and donation processing greatly reduced the time previously required to run the day-to-day operations of NWP. This efficiency allowed a resurgent growth in the Initiative because of the additional time that could be devoted to recruitment/mentoring of volunteers, program development, and community outreach. A \$500 scholarship award was established to celebrate the two-year anniversary of the Initiative (Earth Day 2007). As of 2009, three scholarships totaling \$850 are awarded annually to the authors of the top Apprentice Ecologist project essays; these scholarships will continue to be awarded annually. A dedicated scholarship fund is maintained specifically for this purpose to help ensure its long-term persistence. As of 22 April 2011, a total of 650 motivated youth volunteers have become certified Apprentice Ecologists by completing their own environmental stewardship project and writing an essay about their experience. These young conservation leaders have in turn recruited 20,513 youth volunteers in their projects, collectively resulting in 158,079 hours of community environmental service, the removal of 537,178 pounds of trash from environment, the planting of 90,736 native trees, and the restoration of 33,431 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 great deal of substantive environmental work 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 prior to 2007, 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 disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers in NWP projects, and encouraging more dialogue among Apprentice Ecologists worldwide.
- 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 more opportunities for disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers to become Apprentice Ecologists in the greater Albuquerque, NM area as part of local/national volunteering days and NWP special projects.

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 since 1999. While NWP and the community recognize the importance of these projects, we have now incorporated this work into the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ with a renewed focus on our main target group (i.e., youth with an emphasis on disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers). We have found that disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers are highly unlikely to become Apprentice Ecologists without targeted outreach efforts, organized projects, and structured activities. We will continue conducting collaborative large-scale projects on local volunteering days (e.g., Spring Cleanup in the Foothills, Make a Difference Day etc.), but will expand our outreach efforts to provide more opportunities for disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers to become Apprentice Ecologists as part of these projects. Additionally, if funding becomes available to support part-time or full-time staff positions (NWP Director and/or Program Manager), we plan to engage disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers in NWP special projects during weekdays so that they comprise the majority of the participants and can receive more individual mentoring/encouragement as part of their experience.

**Strategy 2.** Provide more 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 the greater Albuquerque, NM area and has become a program without geographical limits. Adding the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ scholarship in 2007 has dramatically increased the visibility of our program and has also resulted in increased participation of youth from around the world. This component to our program heavily relies on the internet, automated processing software, and online database management programs. Expansion of this component to our program could be done primarily through internet recruiting, marketing, and promotion of the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™.

**Strategy 3.** Invest in our capacity to support the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ through increased visibility.

Direction ⇒ The growth of the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ locally, nationally, and internationally relies heavily on its visibility. Our primary mechanisms for increasing our visibility have been through in-kind internet advertising, promotion of our scholarship via online resources, and media publication about our program or projects in online and printed articles. The number and value of online donations has increased as a result of our more prominent position on the internet, but this still accounts for only a small fraction of our overall funding. Building a strong local support network and winning grants for local projects will likely be dependent, in part, on our ability to increase our visibility within the greater Albuquerque, NM area.

**Strategy 4.** Invest in our capacity to support the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ through development 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. Additional funding resources (via fundraising and grant-making) need to be acquired to support part-time or full-time staff positions (NWP Director and/or Program Manager). 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 by increasing our grant-making efforts. It will also be critical to maintain existing volunteers and recruit new volunteers so that we can sustain a strong volunteer workforce to further strengthen our program infrastructure.

**Goals, Strategic Objectives, Activities, Responsibilities, Materials/Resources, and Measures of Success:**

**Goal 1.** Provide more opportunities for youth (with an emphasis on disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers) to become Apprentice Ecologists in the greater Albuquerque, NM area as part of local volunteering days and NWP special projects.

Strategic Objectives	Activities	Responsibilities	Materials/Resources	Measures of Success
Recruit youth (with inclusion of disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers) for NWP/OSD large-scale projects so that they are well represented at all of our local volunteering days (several months in advance)	Post youth-targeted announcements of our local volunteering days at project sites (trailheads and parking lots), online (volunteer matching databases and scholarship databases), and via email (NWP email list and City of Albuquerque MOVE)	NWP staff, Open Space Division (OSD) staff, and Volunteer(s)	Printed fliers, online announcements, and emails with information about upcoming projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 50% of all project participants are youth volunteers (<math>\leq 21</math> years old)</li> <li>• At least 33% of all youth project participants are disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers</li> </ul>
	Communicate with individual youth volunteers, youth volunteer groups, and youth service organizations (e.g., Bernalillo County Juvenile Detention Center, Albuquerque Public Schools, local nonprofits) about upcoming projects and their level of commitment	NWP staff, OSD staff, and Volunteer(s)	Telephone and email communication	
Recruit disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers for NWP special projects so that they comprise the majority of the project participants (several months in advance)	Communicate with individual youth volunteers, youth volunteer groups, and organizations serving youth (e.g., Bernalillo County Juvenile Detention Center, Albuquerque Public Schools, local nonprofits) about upcoming projects and their level of commitment	NWP staff, OSD staff, and Volunteer(s)	Telephone and email communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 75% of all project participants are disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers</li> </ul>

<p>Engage 150 volunteers (ca. 75 youth volunteers, including 25 disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers) annually in local NWP/OSD volunteering days as part of the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ (Saturdays)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanation of project background, ecological and community importance, progress to date, and value of volunteers</li> <li>• Customized safety training for project activities</li> <li>• Environmental stewardship projects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Litter cleanup</li> <li>-Graffiti removal</li> <li>-Nonnative vegetation removal</li> <li>-Native tree and shrub planting</li> <li>-Trail closure and restoration</li> <li>-Trail building and maintenance</li> <li>-Educational sign installation</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Composition of project essays by youth participants to address key concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Description of flora/fauna of project area</li> <li>-Description of project accomplishments</li> <li>-Explanation of importance of taking care of project area</li> <li>-Thoughts on how project helps the community and environment</li> <li>-Thoughts on how helping the community and environment will help to enrich the volunteer's life</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Completion of project satisfaction surveys by youth and adult volunteers</li> </ul>	<p>NWP (staff, board members, and advisory council), OSD staff, Youth group staff, Youth service organization staff, and Volunteer(s)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transportation of youth participants to project site (Youth groups)</li> <li>• Project sign-in supplies and tables (NWP &amp; OSD)</li> <li>• Project refreshments (Local business donations, NWP, &amp; OSD)</li> <li>• Project work supplies [e.g., gloves, wire brushes, trail work tools, saws, loppers, native plants, signage] (NWP &amp; OSD)</li> <li>• Project essay sheets and surveys (NWP)</li> <li>• Enter project data and essay text into website database (NWP)</li> </ul>	<p>At least 150 volunteers (ca. 75 youth volunteers, including 25 disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers) participate in local NWP/OSD volunteering days as part of the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ each year</p>
<p>Engage 200 volunteers (ca. 150 disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers) annually in NWP special projects as part of the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ (Weekdays)</p>	<p>{{Same as activities for previous strategic objective}}</p> <p><i>Note: NWP special projects will only be possible if funding becomes available to support part-time or full-time staff positions (NWP Director and/or Program Manager) and will depend on obtaining more comprehensive liability insurance coverage.</i></p>	<p>NWP (staff, board members, and advisory council), OSD staff, Youth group staff, Youth service organization staff, and Volunteer(s)</p>	<p>{{Same as materials/resources for previous strategic objective}}</p>	<p>At least 200 volunteers (ca. 150 disadvantaged/at-risk teenagers) participate in NWP special projects as part of the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ each year</p>

**Goal 2.** Provide more opportunities for youth to become Apprentice Ecologists both nationally and internationally.

Strategic Objectives	Activities	Responsibilities	Materials/Resources	Measures of Success
Recruit youth volunteers for independent Apprentice Ecologist projects both nationally and internationally (ongoing)	Post youth-targeted information about Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ online (volunteer matching databases and scholarship databases) and via email (NWP email list)	NWP staff and Volunteer(s)	Online information and email communication	At least 90% of all project participants are youth volunteers (≤21 years old)
	Communication with individual youth volunteers and volunteer youth groups about project and scholarship related questions	NWP staff and Volunteer(s)	Email communication	
Engage 200 youth volunteers annually as leaders of independent Apprentice Ecologist projects nationally and internationally (ongoing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanation of project background, ecological and community importance, progress to date, and value of volunteers (on website and via email when needed)</li> <li>• Customized safety training for project activities (on website and via email when needed)</li> <li>• Projects activities (independently conducted by youth volunteers with email project support when needed):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Vast array of different environmental stewardship projects based on the volunteer’s interest, available time, and local needs</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Composition of project essays by youth volunteers to address key concepts               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Description of flora/fauna of project area</li> <li>-Description of project accomplishments</li> <li>-Explanation of importance of taking care of project area</li> <li>-Thoughts on how project helps the community and environment</li> <li>-Thoughts on how helping the community and environment will help to enrich volunteer’s life</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Online completion of project satisfaction surveys by youth volunteers</li> <li>• Judging of Apprentice Ecologist project essays to determine winners of the annual scholarships by a committee of NWP staff, board members, advisory council members, and past Apprentice Ecologist award winners.</li> </ul>	NWP (staff, board members, advisory council, and past Apprentice Ecologist award winners) and Volunteer(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Email communication</li> <li>• Website driven by PHP software technology and programs to efficiently accommodate and manage project photo/essay postings, send customized project approvals, and generate volunteer/project database</li> <li>• Scholarship fund for awards (top three projects)</li> <li>• Organic tote bags for awards (top ten projects)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 200 youth volunteers become leaders of independent Apprentice Ecologist projects nationally and internationally each year</li> <li>• At least 4,000 youth volunteers (ca. 20 per project) participate in these projects each year</li> </ul>

**Goal 3.** Invest in our capacity to support the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ through increased visibility.

Strategic Objectives	Activities	Responsibilities	Materials/Resources	Measures of Success
Increase number of local public exposures for NWP	Pursue inclusion of NWP related stories in printed articles by contacting local newspapers and magazines and by providing project information, photos, and quotes to grantors and cooperating governmental agencies	NWP (staff, board members, and advisory council), OSD staff, and Volunteer(s)	Telephone and email communication	Increased NWP related stories in local publications
	Provide information on Apprentice Ecologist scholarships to local high school counselors and librarians	NWP staff and Volunteer(s)	Telephone and email communication	Increased local scholarship listings
	Provide NWP project fliers and brochures at local environmentally-related events and at the OSD visitor center	NWP staff, OSD staff, and Volunteer(s)	Printed fliers and brochures	Increased distribution of NWP literature
Increase number of national/international public exposures for NWP	Pursue inclusion of NWP related stories in printed articles by contacting national/international newspapers and magazines	NWP (staff, board members, and advisory council) and Volunteer(s)	Telephone and email communication	Increased inclusion of NWP related stories in national/international publications
	Manage NWP campaigns within Google Adwords (provided by grant) to maximize keyword efficiency, click-through-rate, and conversions	NWP staff and Volunteer(s)	Online account management	Increased Google users converting (e.g., volunteer signups)
	Manage NWP information in online volunteer matching databases to maximize coverage and visibility of the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™	NWP staff and Volunteer(s)	Online account management	Increased number of volunteers becoming Apprentice Ecologists
	Provide information on Apprentice Ecologist scholarships to online scholarship database managers	NWP staff and Volunteer(s)	Email communication	Increased scholarship listings in online scholarship databases
	Email html NWP eNewsletter on a periodic basis (e.g., relating to upcoming volunteer events, annual scholarship announcement etc.) to volunteer/member database	NWP staff and Volunteer(s)	Text writing, email communication	Timely distribution of eNewsletter during key annual events

**Goal 4.** Invest in our capacity to support the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ through development of program infrastructure and staffing.

Strategic Objectives	Activities	Responsibilities	Materials/Resources	Measures of Success
Develop funding resources to address program needs, including funding of part-time or full-time staff positions (i.e., NWP Director and/or Program Manager)	Seek donations of consumable project supplies (i.e., refreshments) from local businesses	NWP staff, OSD staff, and Volunteer(s)	In-person, telephone, mail, and email communication	Donations of consumable project supplies provided by local businesses
	Seek financial donations from businesses to support local Apprentice Ecologist program and overall scholarship fund	NWP staff, OSD staff, and Volunteer(s)	In-person, telephone, mail, and email communication	Increase in the number and total amount of donations from local businesses
	Seek grants from corporations, foundations, and government agencies to support local Apprentice Ecologist program and overall scholarship fund	NWP staff, Student grant writer(s), and Volunteer(s)	In-person, telephone, mail, and email communication	Increase number and total amount of grant funding from corporations, foundations, and government agencies
	Seek grants from corporations, foundations, and government agencies to support our national/international Apprentice Ecologist program and overall scholarship fund	NWP staff, Student grant writer(s), and Volunteer(s)	Telephone, mail, and email communication	Increase number and total amount of grant funding from national/international corporations, foundations, and government agencies
	Partner with OSD for assistance in volunteer recruitment, volunteer management, and project management (including providing supplies) for local projects	NWP staff, OSD staff, and Volunteer(s)	In-person, telephone, mail, and email communication	Collaboration with employees and use of project supplies from OSD at local projects
	Partner with businesses/corporations/agencies that donate funds to facilitate participation by their employees in local NWP volunteer projects	NWP staff and Volunteer(s)	In-person, telephone, and email communication	Maintenance of strong relationship and support from local entities that support NWP projects

	Contact existing supporters (volunteers and members) and recruit new supporters who may be interested in financially supporting NWP and the Apprentice Ecologist Initiative™ (NWP printed project summary and donation form will be sent annually)	NWP (staff, board members, and advisory council) and Volunteer(s)	Text writing, graphic design, printing, and mailing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in the number of total members</li> <li>• Increase in the number and total amount of donations from existing members</li> </ul>
	Conduct Eco-Socks for NWP online fundraiser that features 100% certified organic cotton, bamboo, and wool socks for men, women, children, and babies; socks are made in USA under fair labor/fair trade/sweatshop free conditions.	NWP staff and Volunteer(s)	Socks, mailing supplies, brochures, postage, online sales resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generate sufficient revenue to fund all annual scholarships</li> <li>• Steady increase in revenue over time</li> </ul>
Develop strong volunteer-based programmatic direction and workforce within NWP	Foster dialogue with internal and external stakeholders of NWP by enlisting their assistance in the development of strategic planning documents	NWP staff	In-person, telephone, and email communication	Participation of stakeholders in strategic planning
	Recruit, train, and engage teenage volunteer(s) as student intern(s) for the purpose of assisting with NWP program activities	NWP staff	In-person, telephone, and email communication	Participation of student intern(s) in key operations of NWP
	Engage members of the NWP Board of Directors and Advisory Council in the review of key NWP documents, in helping to guide the overall direction of the organization (e.g., programmatic advice, priority assessment, strategic planning, periodic reviews), and in the judging of the annual scholarship awards	NWP staff	In-person, telephone, mail, and email communication	Participation of members in key decision-making processes of the organization
Maintain strong standards of accountability	Follow protocols adopted by the BBB Wise Giving Alliance and maintain A+ rating by local BBB as an accredited business	NWP staff	Maintain organizational documents and a record of activities	Meet all requirements of the BBB Wise Giving Alliance
	Exceed top criteria thresholds adopted by Charity Navigator	NWP staff	Maintain organizational documents and financial statements	Meet the criteria for a four star Charity Navigator rating
	Freely provide NWP organizational documents and financial statements on our website and to anyone who requests them	NWP staff	Maintain organizational documents and financial statements on website and in files	NWP organizational documents and financial statements freely accessible to the general public