

Advancing Environmental Education and Youth Employment in the Middle Rio Grande - The Start of a Beautiful Partnership for Local Youth

Youth involvement in the natural world through both education as well as employment opportunities has long been a priority area for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). Here in the Southwest Region, our Regional Director Dr. Benjamin Tuggle has always had a passion for creating meaningful conservation experiences for local youth, especially in urban areas where many young people have become increasingly cut off from nature and wild spaces.

In an effort to create a path towards better communication and cooperation while working towards this massive goal, the Service's South West Region has reached out to numerous agencies and groups who feel as strongly as we do that the children are the future of conservation in this country. To continue the conversation as well as find concrete ways to work together to increase our effectiveness in our efforts for New Mexico youth and beyond, the first Advancing Youth Environmental Education and Employment in the Middle Rio Grande Workshop was held at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science in Albuquerque, NM on April 24, 2014. While this team will initially focus on youth in a defined area along the Middle Rio Grande, the plan allows for expansion in the future. This effort builds off of the education and youth hiring recommendations from Secretary Salazar's *Middle Rio Grande Conservation Initiative* (2012), a document which highlights efforts to develop long-term strategies for managing valued resources of the Middle Rio Grande for New Mexican communities.

Charles Walter, Executive Director of the New Mexico Museum of History and Science, was a key speaker at the initial event. Walter has been instrumental in the Middle Rio Grande Conservation Initiative, and has been a member of the Secretary's Committee to develop recommendations to achieve the objectives of America's Great Outdoors initiative by enhancing conservation, recreation, and education in the Middle Rio Grande. Dr. Benjamin Tuggle also spoke to the group, stating that this project, Youth Hiring and Environmental Education for underserved youth in the Middle Rio Grande, is one of his highest priorities for the region. Short presentations were given by each of the participating agencies and groups to provide an overview of their organization and how they could assist in this coordinated effort. Directly after, several group discussions were led by Service staff on topics such as identifying gaps in service to local youth, barriers associated with providing environmental education, and how to facilitate more opportunities for youth employment in the Middle Rio Grande.

A second workshop was held, again at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science, on May 29, where the team continued to refine their message and to find ways to work together to make a difference for youth in our region. During this second meeting, the team was able to get further into the weeds, with several great discussions about how to move forward by utilizing each group or organizations unique skill sets.

Eugenie Bostrom representing the Outdoors Alliance for Kids (OAK) presented the ECHO (Every Child Healthy Outdoors) Across America Tool Kit. This tool kit designed by all of the partners in OAK was based on previous work done in New Mexico and is an option that may be used by the team going forward.

Between these two first meetings, 30 organizations and agencies have been reached. The team

has been able to begin to define the core message of this working group, better understand the communities need to be involved in this conversation, recognize the importance of better working relationships with non-traditional agencies, and much more. These meetings have also been a great step towards identifying what each group or organization could contribute and how we can continue to help each other to fulfil our conservation goals while empowering youth to become a part of the solution. While the Service started this project off, we welcome others to become equal partners in making this dream a reality across the Middle Rio Grande and beyond.