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## Project WILD: A Tool That Provides Camp Counselors with Leadership Opportunities While Managing Risk

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### Abstract

Camps can create a culture that supports youth staff, ages 15-18, in making a valuable contribution to the education program, thereby increasing the quality of the camp's educational impact while at the same time decreasing incidents and accidents during "un-programmed" time. Project WILD, a nationally available interdisciplinary conservation and environmental education program, provides tools to help counselors turn un-programmed time into learning opportunities. In addition, when youth counselors use their skills to lead Project WILD activities, they achieve respect and autonomy, and success in the leadership roles that they seek.

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## Introduction

Each summer, youth, ages 15-18, come to 4-H camp to take on leadership roles as camp counselors. By creating a camp culture that expects these youth staff members to make a valuable contribution to the education program, camps can increase the quality of their educational impact, while at the same time decreasing incidents and accidents that are more likely to occur in "un-programmed" time.

There are many un-programmed times at camp, and risk management research shows these are the times when negative behaviors and injuries occur (Gregg, & Hansen-Stamp, 2005). Project WILD, a nationally available interdisciplinary conservation and environmental education program, can help counselors turn un-programmed time, such as when the lunch is late or the class presenter doesn't arrive, into learning opportunities. In addition, when youth counselors are using their skills to lead Project WILD activities, they achieve respect and autonomy, and success in the leadership roles that they seek.

## Getting WILD at 4-H Camp!

Project WILD is the nation's longest-standing national wildlife education program. The goal of Project WILD is to teach students *how* to think, not *what* to think. In many states, coordination and training support for WILD are provided by state fish and wildlife agencies. In Oregon, the 4-H program is the primary state coordinator of Project WILD. In the 2004-2005 training year, 189 persons attended Oregon Project WILD workshops presented by specially trained WILD facilitators. Many of these WILD facilitators are 4-H staff. Post program evaluations indicate that these persons reached an additional 22,605 youth and adults with activities and education programs using the WILD curricula.

The Council for Environmental Education publishes six guides in support of Project WILD. The

original Project WILD K-12 Guide contains over 100 activity ideas, many of which can be easily adapted for use at 4-H camp. By contacting the State Project WILD Coordinator, 4-H camp programs can arrange for a facilitator to train their staff to teach the activities in Project WILD, or they can send a staff member to become a trained WILD facilitator.

Many 4-H programs across the country offer youth, ages 15-18, the opportunity to be councilors at 4-H camps. These youth may come for a week or a full summer. They may have participated in a county-based counselor training program throughout the school year or have been selected only because they are the correct age or gender to fit the camp's immediate staffing needs. While we hope they all come with an interest in leading younger youth, we know they come with their own intellectual, emotional, social, and physical characteristics and needs that have an impact on their behavior at camp and on the camper's experiences.

The training and organizational framework provided by the camp's adult staff has a great deal to do with helping camp counselors succeed. One of the areas where counselors can make a significant contribution to the camp program is in being prepared to lead Project WILD activities during un-programmed camp time. Un-programmed time can happen both intentionally and unintentionally during the camp's day. When it does, trained counselors will grab the opportunity to let their leadership shine.

Which of these scenarios sounds most like your 4-H camp? At 4-H Camp A, the Camp Director announces that the lunch is late today because the pizza needs 15 more minutes to bake. The campers hang out at the dining hall door. The counselors are in their own group, talking to each other. Suddenly two campers get into a pushing match, and one is knocked down, grazing his head on a concrete retaining wall in the process.

At 4-H Camp B, the Camp Director announces that the lunch is late today because the pizza needs 15 more minutes to bake. "Counselors," she continues, "It's time to get WILD." Without further prompting, the counselors gather their campers in groups in the playing field near the dining hall. They reach into their "bag of tricks" and pull out some props for a Project WILD activity or engage campers in an activity that may not need props. One group looks for resources in How Many Bears Can Live in this Forest? Two groups combine in a game of Oh Deer! Two other groups cooperate in a Habitat Lap Sit. Four groups study effective adaptations in predator-prey relationships in Muskox Maneuvers (Figure 1). Everyone is engaged in a supervised activity.

**Figure 1.**  
Sample Activities from Project Wild

<p><b>How Many Bears Can Live in this Forest?</b> (Project WILD p. 23) Students learn the concept of limiting factors, and how these can affect wildlife populations. <i>Materials:</i> Five colors of tokens (10 of each color for a group of 10-15 campers) One blindfold</p> <p><b>Oh Deer!</b> (Project WILD p. 36) Youth portray deer and one of the three habitat components. This learning game introduces the concept of carrying capacity and limiting factors. Other than a large indoor or outdoor area, there are no materials needed for this activity.</p> <p><b>Habitat Lap Sit</b> (Project WILD p. 61) This activity illustrates suitable habitat. No materials are needed.</p> <p><b>Muskox Maneuvers</b> (Project WILD p. 130) Youth simulate musk oxen and wolves in a predator and prey game to demonstrate effectiveness of adaptations. <i>Materials:</i> Two different colors of flags to use as tails (similar to flag football), one for each youth.</p>
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Of course, we all hope we are responsible for the program described at 4-H Camp B. This scenario can happen at your camp when you provide your counselors with the framework, support and training to empower them to lead short term, impromptu program activities.

## Conclusion

With over 100 activities to choose from in the Project WILD K-12 Guide, camps are sure to find many that support their individual program outcomes. Major themes include Habitats, Interdependence, Changes and Adaptations, Biodiversity, Human Dimensions and Wildlife, Wildlife Issues, and Wildlife Conservation. Many of the Project WILD activities can be led with no props or with only a few props that can be used in multiple activities.

By providing your staff with training in Project WILD, you can be certain that un-programmed time is used safely and constructively instead of becoming an opportunity for inattention and injury. In addition, when adult staff recognize them as valued members of the staff, camp counselors excel in this autonomous role and have the opportunity to practice their leadership skills in the intentional safety of the camp's framework.

## References

Council for Environmental Education. (2002). *Project WILD K-12 curriculum and activity guide*. Houston, TX. Information available at: <http://www.projectwild.org/>

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