

# Building Resilience

PREPARED FOR WILDLIFE ASSOCIATES  
AT-RISK YOUTH PROGRAM  
JUNE 2016



[public  
profit]

[measure and manage  
what matters.]

## **THANK YOU**

Thank you to the following staff at Wildlife Associates, Larkin Street Youth Services, and Marian A. Peterson Middle School, Sunnydale Unified School District:

Steve Karlin, Wildlife Associates Founder  
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Joe Martinucci, Larkin Youth Services Program Manager  
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Thank you also to all the young people from Larkin Street Youth Services and Marian A. Peterson Middle School for sharing reflections on your experience. Your insights make this report possible.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### About the Evaluation

Wildlife Associates cares for non-releasable wild animals at their wildlife sanctuary in Half Moon Bay, CA and provides science education programs in area communities. In addition, Wildlife Associates provides an on-site At-Risk Youth Program. Wildlife Associates partners with existing youth programs and brings small groups to the site to participate in a series of day-long visits over the course of several months. Each visit integrates environmental education and mindfulness and includes presentations of two to four animals, time to walk quietly on the sanctuary land, full group discussions, and rituals. Wildlife Associates seeks to increase youth resilience, improve their self-awareness and confidence, and support them as they develop trust and a sense of connection with each other.

This evaluation of the At-Risk Youth Program brings together direct program observation and semi-structured interviews with participating youth and adults to assess program strengths, identify potential program improvements, and elucidate the program's impact on participating youth.

*For more information About the Evaluation, turn to page 5.*

### Program Strengths and Potential Growth

The At-Risk Youth Program has many strengths. The Program provides a peaceful and safe location away from the participants' day-to-day lives, offers engaging wildlife content, and creates a warm and supportive environment. Youth and adults from the partner programs explicitly noted that the space felt safe and many described the sanctuary itself as "calm," "peaceful," "serene," "magical," and "beautiful."

Youth receive valuable life lessons from the Wildlife Teachers: the power of their own words, the importance of second chances, the value of relying on others, and how to adapt to new situations. Moreover, Wildlife Associates staff members build community by sharing their own personal life stories, being attentive to youth, and asking youth open-ended questions. As one partner staff mentioned about a key Wildlife Associates staff member, "[He has an] amazing ability to read students."

At the same time, the data suggest that the program could clarify safety guidelines, provide a wider variety of activities, and create additional opportunities to foster youth voice.

*For more information on Program Strengths and Areas for Improvement, turn to page 8.*

“

If I can put my name on something, it is that this program is legit - the people, the animals, the setting.

”

~ Partner Program Staff  
Member

## Impact on At-Risk Youth

Youth and staff shared specific examples of lasting growth and development among youth participants. Youth grew socially and emotionally: they gained confidence, developed empathy for others, and potentially learned self-regulation skills. Also, the group developed a cohesive identity and sense of belonging as the participants bonded through group discussions and teambuilding activities. As one participant reflected, they learned a lot about friendship during their time at Wildlife Associates.

“

Shy people are now speaking up when they feel the time is right. It is an open environment.

”

~ Partner Program Staff Member

Finally, participants developed – or remembered – their interest and respect for nature and wildlife. Together, these have the potential to set youth on to a path toward greater success in school and life by building social and emotional competencies and expanding their horizons.

*For more information on how youth changed, turn to page 13.*

## Data-driven Recommendations

Wildlife Associates offers a powerful At-Risk Youth Program and should continue this important work. The evaluation suggests a few recommended updates:

- Incorporate safety as a discussion topic with specific applications to the activities at Wildlife;
- Provide additional hands-on and collaborative activities;
- Incorporate yet more opportunities for youth voice and leadership;
- Consider follow up interviews with former Peterson participants.

“

Asking questions is more interactive and you are able to give your ideas and thoughts.

”

~ Larkin Street Youth

*For a Summary of Recommendations, turn to page 15.*

# ABOUT THE EVALUATION

## About Wildlife Associates

Founded 36 years ago, Wildlife Associates cares for over 50 non-releasable wild animals at their wildlife sanctuary in Half Moon Bay. Wildlife Associates provides science education programs aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards in schools, libraries and other programs around the San Francisco Bay Area. These off-site environmental education programs connect youth with wild animals to educate them about environmental stewardship. Wildlife Associates also provides intensive programming on site for over 140 youth per year through the At-Risk Youth program.

## The At-Risk Youth Program

The At-Risk Youth Program integrates the environmental education component into a mindfulness-based program that blends nature, rituals, discussions, and other activities at the sanctuary. Wildlife Associates partners with existing youth programs and brings small groups – roughly 5-12 youth – to the site to participate in a series of day-long visits over the course of several months. Drawing on the site's expansive, quiet beauty, the visits include presentations of two to four animals, time to walk quietly on the sanctuary land, full group discussions, and rituals such as building a fire together in an outdoor fire pit. About 10 youth agencies participate each year.

The At-Risk Youth Program has a set of inter-related social, emotional, and science content goals. By participating in the program, youth will:

- Explore and share their inner feelings, fears, and hopes;
- Build their confidence;
- Develop empathy;
- Develop connection with and trust for each other;
- Learn about wild animals and their environment;
- Increase their ability to be resilient in the face of current and future life challenges.

## Resiliency, Belonging and Nature: Key Protective Factors

The Wildlife Associates model aligns strongly with youth development research in resilience. This research defines resilience as a *capacity* to adapt to changes and stress, as a *process* for returning to normal functioning after a stressful experience, and as a set of *outcomes* that result from successful navigation of stressful experiences. Young people may bring their own internal capacity to survive stressful or traumatic events. At the same time, supportive adults can create conditions – or protective

### [AT A GLANCE]

4 day-long field observations of At-Risk Youth Program activities

2 youth focus groups

Interviews with 4 staff from partner programs

2 programs participated in the evaluation: a middle school in Sunnyvale and Larkin Street Youth Services in San Francisco

factors – to help youth navigate through these events. As youth successfully navigate stressful life events, they build a set of skills and mindsets that can help them navigate future stressors.<sup>1</sup>

A variety of protective factors are embedded in the Wildlife Associates model:

- Physical and psychological safety: provide a physically safe place where youth feel free to open up and share about their own identity and lived experience;
- Presence of supportive adults: caring adults that demonstrate that they are taking the time to get to know youth;
- Opportunities to achieve or feel competent: activities with appropriate challenge that allow youth to work toward mastery of a social, academic or technical skill;
- Supportive peer relationships: positive bonds with peers who support each other;
- Belonging to a group: a sense of being part of a community.

Outdoor education and wilderness therapy provide additional perspective on the likely benefit of the At-Risk Youth Program. Through outdoor or wilderness experience, an individual can grow and change through the interaction between the individual and the outdoor or natural environment specifically. Thus, outdoor programs may provide yet another unique protective factor for young people.<sup>2</sup>

## A Qualitative Approach: Data Sources and Methods

Wildlife Associates contracted with Public Profit, an Oakland-based evaluation consultancy, to assess the effectiveness of the At-Risk Youth Program by examining the process of program delivery and the outcomes as reported by youth and staff. Together, Public Profit and Wildlife Associates identified two At-Risk Youth Program partner organizations to participate in the evaluation: Marian A. Peterson Middle School (Peterson MS) in Sunnyvale, CA and Larkin Street Youth Services (Larkin Street) in San Francisco. Meanwhile, Public Profit developed a qualitative approach to the evaluation, which integrates direct program observations guided by a customized rubric with youth focus groups and partner staff interviews. These qualitative data were then coded with emergent themes in line with the evaluation questions (Table 1) to provide insight into program strengths and impacts, and to suggest areas for improvement.

“

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”

~ Partner Program Staff  
Member

<sup>1</sup> Lee, Tak Yan et al. (2012) “Resilience as a Positive Youth Development Construct: A Conceptual Review.” *The Scientific World Journal*.

<sup>2</sup> Russell, K and Farnum, J. (2004) “A concurrent model of the wilderness therapy process.” *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*.

**Table 1. Evaluation Questions and Data Sources**

Evaluation Question	Data Sources		
	Observations	Youth Focus Groups	Staff Interviews
What are the key strengths of the At-Risk Youth Program?	●	●	●
What are possible areas for improvement?	●	●	●
How has the program impacted youth participants?		●	●

These three perspectives – that of the observer, the youth and the program staff – from two distinct partner programs build on each other to provide a multi-dimensional perspective on the success of the program and offer some suggestions for program enhancements.

**About the Observations**

Public Profit conducted four observation visits to the animal sanctuary. Two of the visits coincided with visits by the Larkin Street’s Hospitality Learning Center group; two occurred during visits by Peterson MS students. During the observation, the evaluation staff stayed with the group, observing the opening gathering, the presentation on the animals of that day, and other collaborative activities incorporated into the visit (such as building a fire or making soup for lunch).

In order to analyze the observation, the Public Profit team developed a tailored site visit rubric for Wildlife Associates. This rubric defined a series of performance categories including safety and other structural factors as well as belonging, participation, and wildlife content. Using guidance provided in the protocol, each visit received a rating of “exceptional,” “competent” or “unsatisfactory” in each performance category. See appendices for the rating rubric and a summary of the ratings.

**About the Youth Focus Groups**

Public Profit conducted two focus groups with the At-Risk Youth Program participants. The first was with seven Peterson MS students at Wildlife Associates during one of their final visits. The second was with eight Larkin Street youth at a Larkin Street facility after the conclusion of their round of visits; they received a modest incentive from Larkin Street to participate. These focus groups explored what the participants learned from the experience, how they had changed, and any changes they would make to the program. Each participant had been to the Wildlife Sanctuary at least three times. (The full focus group protocol is in the appendix.)

**About the Staff Interviews**

Public Profit conducted two interviews with agency partners to gather staff perspective on the same themes: strengths, impacts, and areas for program improvement. The evaluation team interviewed three staff members from Larkin Street and one staff member from Peterson MS. (The full focus group protocol is in the appendix.)



## Program Practices: Strengths and Potential for Growth

The evaluation team consolidated the full range of data collected for the evaluation in order to distill the program's core strengths, which include: providing a peaceful location, the wildlife content itself, and the supportive environment created by the adult staff. At the same time, the data suggest that the program could clarify safety guidelines, provide a wider variety of activities, and create additional opportunities to foster youth voice.

### At-Risk Youth Program Strengths

#### A Beautiful and Calm Place Outside the Normal Routine

Wildlife Associates occupies 120 acres in a quiet inland valley south of Half Moon Bay. Surrounded by forest, the sanctuary includes expanses of lawn and well-kept buildings.

For the Larkin Street group, the Wildlife Sanctuary is about 30 miles away from the urban setting of San Francisco. Larkin Street focus group participants described the Animal Sanctuary as “calm,” “peaceful,” “serene,” “magical,” and “beautiful.” “It reminded me how nature makes me feel peaceful and happy. I was on a different page. Deep inside, I love nature. It opened up an old feeling – I like it,” one Larkin Street participant said. In addition to the Wildlife Sanctuary's beauty, nearly all partner program staff and at least one youth explicitly noted that the space felt *safe*, a key benefit for these youth who have been homeless or at-risk for homelessness in the past. One partner program staff member pointed out, “I've heard [from the group] that it is very peaceful and being somewhere that is quiet and safe is a big deal.”

The Wildlife Associates sanctuary was also a break from Larkin Street's learning center; at the sanctuary participants may have felt *more comfortable about being themselves*. The partner program staff members saw it as a different space. “When we first [connected with Wildlife], we wanted to create a community within the group – wanted to show them what else is out there and see that we are all connected,” one staff member said. In the learning center, they “stress being responsible and career readiness,” while at Wildlife Associates they get to know each other better on a deeper level than they can at the learning center.

For the Peterson MS group, visits to the sanctuary provide a break from middle school. A few participants from this group said they would rather be at Wildlife Associates than school because it gave them opportunities to *express themselves, learn outside the classroom, and explore their interests*. One Peterson MS participant said, “I like expressing myself more here and I am interested in animals. I have As in every class. It kind of gets boring and each class is routine. Here, it is more flexible.” Like the Larkin Street group, it also helped them learn more about their peers through the stories shared; for some, it even helped them to trust their peers more.

“

They are putting school aside and taking care of the student's life, soul, and heart for the students who need it.

”

- Partner Program Staff  
Member

## Wildlife Teachers and Life Lessons

During each visit, Wildlife Associates staff would bring out two to three animals, referred to as Wildlife Teachers, present them to the participants, describe their life before coming to Wildlife Associates, and share adaptations the animals possessed in order to survive. These lessons touched on hardship and recovery, concepts that could be connected to participants' own lives. In order to foster these connections, staff would ask open-ended questions of youth or give an example that could be applied to youths' lives. During one observation in particular, staff assigned youth into three groups and asked guiding questions such as, "How does this relate to what has happened in school?" "How does it impact your daily life?" and "Have you ever misjudged someone?" to connect youths' own experiences with the Wildlife Teacher's life lessons. This small group activity encouraged youth to reflect on the wildlife lessons and see the relevance of the Wildlife Teacher's experiences to their own.

Youth receive various life lessons from the Wildlife Teachers: the power of their own words, the importance of second chances, the value of relying on others, and how to adapt to new situations. "I loved how they talked about how great the animals are and their story," one Larkin Street youth said. Many youth named the serval (a medium-sized wildcat native to sub-Saharan Africa) as their favorite

“

It does not matter how small you are - you can still make an impact.

”

- Peterson MS Youth

Wildlife Teacher because of its beauty and calm demeanor. "My favorite animal teacher was the serval, because she was quiet and underestimated by us... It does not matter how small you are – you can still make an impact," one Peterson MS participant said. A few enjoyed seeing the owl because it's "smart" and "okay with being alone." One Larkin Street participant enjoyed seeing the parrot because of its loyalty, since it sticks to one person and protects them. One Peterson MS participant reported that they liked the snake best because they faced their fear of snakes by petting it. Overall, all participants spoke fondly of at least some of the animals.

## Wildlife Associates Staff Create A Supportive Environment

As suggested by all three sources, the Wildlife Associates staff provided youth with a supportive and caring environment. The Wildlife Associates staff was able to build a community by pulling everyone together, as mentioned by one partner program staff member: "Talking with the group tells them that they are part of the group – it sheds a light on the community struggle."

All data resources found that staff took the time to get to know youth, and youth and Wildlife Associates staff shared personal information with the group. In all sessions observed, Wildlife Associates staff consistently asked youth open-ended questions to get to know them better. Some of the questions include: "What is going to be your signature in bringing people together? What is your way of making people feel well?" "How did you affect people today?" and "What animal do you remind yourself of?" One Larkin Street participant complimented the staff: "I loved how they wanted to take the time to get to know us." For example, Wildlife Associates staff recognized a potential leader in one of the Larkin Street participants, despite her social anxiety. So, for one session, the Wildlife Associates staff assigned her to lead her peers in activities such as discussions and building the fire. The Larkin staff in the staff interview noted that "she excelled that day."

One partner program staff member commented on a Wildlife Associates staff member's "amazing ability to read students." Another partner program staff member expanded this point: "Our population can be tough for anyone." Another staff member shared how one of the Wildlife Associates staff members was able to understand a strong-willed youth through a "powerful" exercise. According to the staff member, a Wildlife Associates staff member asked the youth to stand up, hold a face of a volunteer and look at him for 30 seconds: "The exercise was powerful... I wouldn't say he drastically changed but seeing him do this and being committed to this exercise shows how capable he is."

In addition to staff encouraging youth to share about themselves and recognizing each member's unique attributes, Wildlife Associates staff also shared their own personal stories. One Larkin Street youth described the Wildlife Associates staff member's stories as "empowering." During the observed sessions, staff would often share stories in the Fire Circle. These stories were about staff members' past experiences, life lessons, family, and friends. The Peterson MS staff member mentioned that the stories may have been at a slow pace for the youth, but added that it was beneficial for youth to "slow down [their] own lives and stop worrying about [their] phones or media." By sharing about themselves, Wildlife Associates staff may mitigate the authority role of staff members and establish a more equal footing between the participants and staff.

In all sessions observed, staff established strong positive group norms. As youth spoke, staff would nod, smile, and make eye contact with them. If youth were struggling to give an answer, staff would allow them time to answer, and sometimes staff would ask their peers to help them. In addition, across all observations youth were encouraged to thank each other for their contributions or apologize to each other for wrongdoings. These practices are consistent with high quality standards for promoting caring and a sense of belonging among participants.

“

I loved how they wanted to take the time to get to know us.

”

~ Larkin Street Youth

## Potential for Growth

Wildlife Associates provides a strong and unique program. At the same time, there is room for improvement as in all things. Notably, most of the potential for growth is in increasing opportunities or types of activities that Wildlife Associates already provides: a more varied experience for youth with even more opportunities to express themselves, ask questions, and make connections between their activities at the sanctuary and their own lives.

*For a summary of recommendations, please turn to page 15.*

### **Vary Activities, Include More Collaborative and Hands-On Options**

Youth benefit when they have a chance to work together toward a shared goal. Collaborative activities can build teamwork, create a sense of belonging, and develop leadership skills. Similarly, hands-on activities that involve creating or doing can develop concrete skills. The evaluation team observed such activities during the visits, and young people from both groups brought up these activities (making the stew, repairing a fence) as highlights of their experience. At the same time, at least some youth wanted to see more opportunities for these kinds of activities.

For one Larkin Street youth, the collaborative activities “broke the tension” that he was experiencing with one of his classmates. These activities also allowed staff to see a different side of their students when the group fixed the fence. As one staff member said about a particular participant, “His skills were highlighted by his peers, staff, and me. I was able to bring that back in the class and see him differently as a person.”

During one observation, the Peterson MS youth worked together to make stew for lunch. Each youth was actively engaged in their assigned job, such as cutting vegetables and serving the stew. Afterwards, Wildlife Associates staff asked for them to share their thought of the day. All youth responded positively about making the stew: some mentioned that they enjoy cooking and some how food brings people together. Making stew allowed youth to do something that they cannot do at school, to explore their interests, to develop skills in cooking, and to learn about teamwork. Youth continued to feel positively about this experience at the focus group weeks later, mentioning the stew as one of the highlights of their time at Wildlife Associates.

Building on their comments about making stew together, Peterson MS youth remarked that they would like to see a greater variety of activities. They noted that they did the same routine every time including building a fire and watching the animal presentation. The Peterson MS staff also had heard from the youth that existing activities moved too slowly. Taken together, this suggests that Wildlife Associates may want to incorporate a wider variety of activities, including additional hands-on and collaborative activities, into the time at the sanctuary.

“

Asking questions is more interactive and you are able to give your ideas and thoughts.

”

- Larkin Street Youth

## Encourage Youth to Speak

Certainly, youth currently have time to speak during their time at the sanctuary. Youth in both groups reported that they enjoyed Wildlife Associates because it brought them closer to their peers, especially during the Fire Circle when they had a chance to speak to each other. One Larkin Street youth said, “It brought me closer to the group. The circles allowed people to open up about their lives—I learned a lot about them.” In all sessions observed, staff asked youth open-ended questions such as “What part do you play in the group?,” “How do you see beauty?,” “What do you want to be known for?,” and “What makes you good at your job?” Through these questions, youth were able to share their experiences from school, work, and life.

Yet a handful of youth in both focus groups, especially the Peterson MS group, commented that sometimes the talks by Wildlife Associates were “boring” and at “kinda a slow pace.” One partner program staff member noticed that, during one long talk by a Wildlife Associates staff member, the group was not paying attention as evidenced by their body language. Also, the young people appreciated the opportunity to ask questions themselves. “I think it is great to listen and ask questions. Asking questions is more interactive and you are able to give your ideas and thoughts,” one Larkin Street youth said.

Having multiple opportunities to speak, ask questions, and share what they are thinking builds executive functioning, which is key to critical thinking and decision-making later in life. Therefore, Wildlife Associates may wish to increase the opportunities for youth to speak, balancing staff stories and wisdom with additional time for youth to talk with each other and ask questions.

“

Shy people are now speaking up when they feel the time is right. It is an open environment.

”

~ Partner Program Staff Member

## Physical Safety

Finally, all sessions observed received a “competent” rating in safety, as guided by the observation rubric: staff shared procedures with the youth only after safety issues arose (e.g., after starting to light the fire or while already handling animals). While no injuries were observed, staff may consider being slightly more proactive about safety.

## Impact on Youth

Youth and staff shared specific examples of lasting growth and development among youth participants. Youth grew socially and emotionally: their confidence improved, they developed empathy for others, and they may have learned self-regulation skills. Also, the group developed a cohesive identity, giving members a sense of belonging. Finally, participants developed – or remembered – their interest and respect for nature and wildlife. Together, these have the potential to set youth on a path toward greater success in school and life by building social and emotional competencies and expanding their horizons.

### Social and Emotional Competencies

#### Increased Confidence, Especially Among Girls

All three girls in the Peterson MS focus group mentioned that Wildlife Associates helped them feel more confident speaking publicly. “Wildlife Associates has taught me to be more confident in myself and public speaking,” one Peterson MS girl said. As mentioned above, one of the Larkin Street youth, a young woman, also had the opportunity to be a successful leader for a day.

The girls’ increase in confidence may be due to Wildlife Associates staff encouraging everyone to share their thoughts in discussions and asking questions during Wildlife Teachers’ lessons. Wildlife Associates staff would compliment youths’ bravery for speaking aloud and their public speaking skills. When others are talking, one girl said, “Everyone listens and is quiet – you can be more confident.” One staff interviewed also noticed youth feeling more confident irrespective of gender: “They are a lot more comfortable in the group situation. Shy people are now speaking up when they feel the time is right. It is an open environment.”

#### Empathy

Both Larkin Street and Peterson MS staff members mentioned that Wildlife Associates helped their students understand others or demonstrate empathy. One of the ways that Wildlife Associates staff does this, according to a partner program staff member, is sharing how animals experienced trauma and loss with youth who may have experienced the same. “[Life] will get better and you will get better. You can recognize that experience with others,” the Larkin Street staff member said. Another partner program staff member witnessed one of the Wildlife Associates participants unexpectedly helping one of her classmates who was having a meltdown during school. “It was nice to see her being caring and handling it,” he said.

#### Self-regulation

Finally, there was some evidence that being at Wildlife Associates may have an impact on young people’s ability to self-regulate or manage their emotions. One staff noticed a change in some of his students’ ability to do so: “Now they are able to identify if they have been outlandish ... They are able to check themselves before it gets too late.”

## Appreciation of Nature and Animals

Both groups mentioned that they have a greater appreciation of nature and animals after attending Wildlife Associates. “Wildlife Associates has changed the way I think about life. I’ve seen animals [that have] suffer[ed]. We got to be open-minded,” a Peterson MS youth said.

Since Larkin Street youth live in the midst of an extremely urban environment, Wildlife Associates reminded youth about the beauty of nature. “I see a transformation and huge appreciation of youth in urban environment appreciating nature,” said one partner program staff member. Another staff member noticed that after her students felt a strong connection to the animals on one of their first trips, they wanted to make improvements for the farm. These improvements included fixing the fence, placing a bell and creating an enclosure for the farm.

Peterson MS youth expressed their appreciation of nature and animals during one observed session. In this session, Wildlife Associates asked youth, “How has your Wildlife experience changed things?” Many youth said they have a greater appreciation of animals and nature. One youth said, “Wildlife has taught me that animals can teach us a thing or two about us and how we can affect the world.” Another youth said, “I look at trees and nature differently. We should give back to them... Mother Nature will always be here for us.” In addition, one partner program staff also noticed an appreciation for wildlife and nature in his students who have attended Wildlife Associates. He found that his Wildlife Associates students acted calmer than non-Wildlife Associates students when a bee flew by during class. “I wish I had every Wildlife Associates student in my classroom. When a bee flies at a kid, they freak out. Some Wildlife Associates students that I have, we look at each other and think the kid is acting crazy. A simple example of a bee flying on someone’s shirt shows this result,” he explained.

## Sense of Belonging and Bonding as a Group

Wildlife Associates helps youth feel that they belong to their Wildlife Associates community. The observed sessions had between four to eight participants for each session. One partner program staff member found that the small group size allows the group “to get to know people faster...I got to see people getting to know each other and learn about the group dynamics.” This may help youth to feel welcomed to participate and contribute in session activities. For all four sessions observed, the “sense of belonging” performance category received an “exceptional” rating. The focus groups and staff interviews provided evidence to confirm this high rating.

Both focus groups discussed how the program has allowed them to bond more as a group through the group discussions and teambuilding activities. For the Peterson MS group, they were able to see their peers in a different light far from the hallways of middle school. As one partner program staff member said, “Anyone who is attending gets to know themselves better and gets to learn how to interact with people and be respectful.” Similarly, the Larkin Street youth reported that they were able to bond as a group during their time at Wildlife Associates. One Larkin Street participant mentioned that she learned a lot about friendship and connected with her peers, especially during one exercise. In this exercise, the Wildlife Associates staff had the youth touch each other to send their “medicine” to each other. Afterwards, the Wildlife Associates staff asked the youth if they noticed how they brought people together or brought the best out of their classmates. Through these practices, the youth were able to bond more as a group.



## Summary of Data-driven Recommendations

Based on the data collected through the observations and the focus groups and interviews, the evaluation team offers the following recommendations for future At-Risk Youth Programming:

### **Recommendation #1: Stay the Course.**

The data confirm that Wildlife Associates offers a unique and important program. One partner program staff member found the general strength of the program is “that there is something for everyone – sharing, talking philosophically, and looking at animals.” Giving youth a chance to leave their normal routine, experience calm and beauty, and learn the life lessons from each Wildlife Teacher appears to promote a sense of belonging and community, build confidence especially among female participants, and connect youth to a group of safe, caring adults. The remaining recommendations are suggestions to deepen existing youth engagement and impact.

### **Recommendation #2: Review Safety Procedures.**

We do recommend that staff share safety rules with youth before the activities. In keeping with the Wildlife Associates model, this need not be a lecture, but could be integrated into a group discussion on the concept of “safety” more generally with guiding questions that encourage youth to reflect on safety procedures at the sanctuary in particular.

### **Recommendation #3: Consider Increasing Hands-on, Collaborative Activities.**

Youth, especially the middle school youth, enjoyed the opportunities to engage in hands-on activities such as cooking a meal together or mending a fence. At the same time, some youth felt that parts of their time at Wildlife were “boring” and said the program would improve if there were more activities.

Yet staff from both partner agencies noted that the existing slow pace and calm at the sanctuary were key to the success of the program for their participants. As staff noted, what youth may temporarily find boring is not necessarily ineffective. On balance, we recommend that Wildlife Associates consider adding some additional hands on, collaborative activities that fit within the existing format to see if these activities engage youth even further.

### **Recommendation #4: Find Even More Opportunities for Youth to Talk with Each Other, Ask Questions and Lead Activities.**

During the visits, we observed several opportunities for youth voice: to ask youth for their opinions, to encourage them to ask their own questions, and to lead each other through activities. This is a clear strength of the program. At the same time, there were opportunities to develop this further through more frequent small group discussions, more opportunities to answer and ask questions during full group time, additional “weather reports” to check in about how engaged youth are with the session, and, in line with recommendation #2, more opportunities for youth to lead activities.

Since giving youth a chance to share their opinion and explore their own questions promotes higher order thinking and executive functioning, valuable skills for later life success for these at-risk youth, we recommend that Wildlife Associates build even more opportunities into the program.

### **Recommendation #5: Include Former MS Participants in Future Evaluations.**

Middle school youth are still at the beginning of their adolescence. They may not have been able to articulate the benefits of their experience as thoroughly as the older Larkin Street youth. Assuming that Peterson staff could locate youth who participated in prior years, Wildlife Associates may consider interviewing a sample of former participants to gather their matured perspective.



# Data Companion

## Data Companion A. At-Risk Youth Program Observation Rubric

Below is the tailored observation rubric that Public Profit used to rate the observations.

	UNSATISFACTORY	COMPETENT	EXCEPTIONAL
<p><b>Caring &amp; Supportive Environment</b> Staff establishes positive group norms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff does not appear to intentionally establish group norms. Instead, it appears that staff sets norms in response to youths’ behaviors (e.g., youth shout and staff asks for no more shouting for the remainder of the day).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff does not facilitate activities that contribute to positive group norms but models positive group norms for youth (eye contact, asks follow-up questions, etc.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff facilitates activities that contribute to positive group norms (introductions, open-ended questions, asking to thank group members for contributions).</li> <li>Staff encourages youth to try new experiences.</li> </ul>
<p><b>High Expectations</b> Staff expectations of youth are clear. Expectations are high enough that youth must try in order to meet them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff does not communicate behavior expectations to youth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff clearly communicates behavior expectations to youth and reminds youth as needed.</li> <li>Staff inconsistently models behavior expectations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff clearly communicates behavior expectations to youth and reminds youth as needed.</li> <li>Staff models behavior expectations.</li> <li>Staff makes a connection between high expectations in other areas of youths’ lives and what is being discussed in the activity.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cooperative Learning</b> Youth practice teamwork skills and understand their value as a contributing team member.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff does not provide youth an opportunity to collaborate OR staff takes control of the collaborative task.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff gives youth at least one opportunity to work together to complete a task.</li> <li>Staff provides limited guidance even when youth struggle to complete task.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff provides youth more than one opportunity to work together to complete a task.</li> <li>Staff provides directions and guidance as needed but allows youth to decide how to approach the task.</li> </ul>

	UNSATISFACTORY	COMPETENT	EXCEPTIONAL
<p><b>Safety</b> Staff tells youth safety rules when handling Wildlife Teachers and how to be safe in activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff does not demonstrate or tell youth the proper way to handle a Wildlife Teacher.</li> <li>• Staff also does not share safety procedures with youth before or during an activity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff tells but does not demonstrate to youth the proper ways to handle a Wildlife Teacher.</li> <li>• Staff shares safety procedures with youth as the safety issues arise during an activity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff demonstrates and tells youth the proper way to handle a Wildlife Teacher.</li> <li>• Staff shares safety procedures with youth prior to engaging in potentially dangerous activities (building fires, interacting with animals, etc.)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Relationship building</b> Staff and youth have opportunities to get to know one another better.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff does not provide youth with opportunities to share their personal experiences nor does the staff share his/her own experiences with youth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff invites youth to share their experiences with the group but does not share his/her own experiences <b>OR</b> staff shares his/her experiences but does not invite youth to do so.</li> <li>• There is evidence of judgment or bias that staff does not address.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff invites youth to share their lived experiences with the group.</li> <li>• Staff shares their own personal experiences with youth.</li> <li>• Staff addresses any evidence of judgment or bias in response to the shared stories.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Sense of Belonging</b> Youth feel welcomed to participate and contribute in session activities in ways that feel comfortable for youth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff ignores contributions of youth.</li> <li>• Staff allows exclusion of youth.</li> <li>• Staff does not provide opportunities for youth to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff sometimes acknowledges youth contributions.</li> <li>• Staff inconsistently tries to include youth.</li> <li>• The staff may try to include one youth but not others or may use inclusive practices during 1 part of the activity.</li> <li>• Staff rarely solicits youths' feelings and thoughts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff ensures that all youth are included.</li> <li>• Staff acknowledges contributions of youth.</li> <li>• Staff encourages youth to contribute his/her thoughts and feelings.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Personal Recognition</b> Staff explicitly expresses how youth are adding value to the group.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff does not acknowledge a <b>unique</b> skill, attribute, and/or contribution of a particular youth.</li> <li>• Staff also does not provide youth an opportunity to recognize their peers for a unique skill, attribute, and/or contribution.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least once during the session, staff acknowledges a <b>unique</b> skill, attribute, and/or contribution of a particular youth <b>OR</b> staff provides youth an opportunity to recognize their peers for a unique skill, attribute, and/or contribution.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least once during the session, staff acknowledges a <b>unique</b> skill, attribute, and/or contribution of a particular youth.</li> <li>• Staff provides youth an opportunity to recognize their peers for a unique skill, attribute, and/or contribution.</li> </ul>

	UNSATISFACTORY	COMPETENT	EXCEPTIONAL
<p><b>Wildlife Content</b> Youth learn basic information about the Wildlife Teacher and learn a life lesson from the experience of the Wildlife Teacher.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff introduces youth to 1-2 Wildlife Teachers.</li> <li>• Staff shares little to no information about the Wildlife Teacher’s habitat, diet, and unique characteristics or what can be learned from the Wildlife Teacher.</li> <li>• There is not enough time for youth to get their questions about the Wildlife Teacher answered.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff introduces youth to 2-3 Wildlife teachers.</li> <li>• Staff shares the Wildlife Teacher’s story (how animal became a Wildlife Teacher) but doesn’t share what can be learned from the Wildlife Teacher (e.g., second chances, strength of familial bonds, etc.).</li> <li>• Youth get most of their questions about the Wildlife Teacher answered.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff introduces youth to 2-3 Wildlife Teachers.</li> <li>• Staff share the Wildlife Teacher’s story as well as what can be learned from the Wildlife Teacher (e.g., second chances, strength of familial bonds, etc.).</li> <li>• Youth have enough time to get all of their questions about the Wildlife Teacher answered.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Meaningful Participation</b> Youth have opportunities to reflect on their program experiences and provide feedback intended to improve the program.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff does not solicit youth feedback nor do they ask youth questions that help youth to reflect on the activities of the day.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff uses only closed-ended questions to solicit feedback about the day’s activities (e.g., did you like seeing the animals?) and/or to encourage youth to reflect on that day’s activities (e.g., did the animal scare you?).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff asks open-ended questions or leads activities that help youth to reflect on the activities of the day and provide feedback on the program.</li> <li>• When staff use youths’ feedback, they make it explicit to the group and/or staff verbally plan how to incorporate youths’ input into future sessions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Real World Application</b> Staff encourages youth to connect life lessons discussed in the activity to their own lives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff does not prompt youth to think about how lessons in activity can relate to their lived experiences</li> <li>• When youth make a connection on their own, staff does not ask follow-up questions nor does the staff make the connection clear to other youth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff tells youth how the activity connects to their real life.</li> <li>• When youth make a connection on their own, staff responds with follow-up questions and/or makes the connection explicit to the rest of the group.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff prompts youth to think about how topics or lessons learned during the activity relate to their own lives.</li> <li>• Staff provides enough time for youth to share life connections with the group.</li> </ul>

## Data Companion B. Focus Group Protocol

### Welcome and Introduction

*Introduce team, review the purpose, clarify confidentiality*

#### Question #1

Who was your favorite Wildlife Teacher? What did you like about them the most? What lesson did you learn from them?

Think about it silently

Share with the group

Did anyone say something that sounded like it was also true for you?

Did anyone say something that surprised you or that you haven't thought of before?

#### Question #2

Based on our observations of your program and others, we think that coming to Wildlife Associates might affect the way you think or feel about yourself, the other people who came here with you, wildlife and nature, your school and family.

*Show diagram the illustrates the interlocking nature of these*

First we are going to do a quiet visualization exercise. I'll ask everyone to close their eyes. Take a moment to think about the day you first came to Wildlife Associates. What were you thinking about? What was going on in your life at that time? What did you think of the other people in the van with you, the other people coming from school? What did you think would happen here at Wildlife Associates?

Now, think about who you are today. Who have you become since you started visiting here? How are you different? This could be a different way you view yourself, a different way you view the other people here, a different way you view your family or other people at school including teachers, or a different way you view animals and nature.

Now, think about what is different about you and be ready to share first with a partner, then with the full group.

*Pair, then full group share.*

After each person shares, I'm going to ask the partner if they have anything to add about what the original person shared.

*After each person has gone, ask the group if they noticed anything that was similar in what people said. Then, give them a chance to respond to what other people said.*

Did anyone say something that sounded like it was also true for you?

Did anyone say something that surprised you or that you haven't thought of before?

### **Question #3**

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN: If a group of younger kids (MS) were going, what do you think Wildlife Associates should do differently?

*[ use THINK – PAIR – SHARE if group is silent or short ]*

Did anyone say something that sounded like it was also true for you?

Did anyone say something that surprised you or that you haven't thought of before?

### **Closing**

Look at the quotes around the room [pulled from observations]. These were pulled from our observations of groups at Wildlife Associates. Which one do you like the most? Please go stand by it and we will give everyone the opportunity to explain why.

Thank you very much for your time today.

## Data Companion C. Staff Interview Protocol

### Welcome and Introduction

*Introduce self/team, review the purpose, clarify confidentiality*

### Interview questions

1. How do these particular young people come to be the participants in this program? How are they selected? Or do they sign up themselves?
2. What is important about this program for these young people? What do they get out of it?  
What is important about this program for this Larkin program?

We are using 2 theoretical frameworks to understand the students' experience. The first one is about resiliency. In general, the following experiences/supports may contribute to young people being more resilient in the face of on-going or future challenges:

In what ways do you see these experiences being created at Wildlife Associates? Which of these elements seem to be strongest?

3. The second framework is builds off work with wilderness experiences and looks at how such an experience affects:
  - a. How they think about themselves
  - b. How they think and feel about their fellow participants who come here with them
  - c. How they think about the life they go back to (school, home, neighborhood)
  - d. How they think about nature and wildlife

In what ways do you see any changes in your students related to these elements of the diagram? Where do you see the most change?

*\*\* show copy of the diagram \*\**

4. The last questions were about positive growth or change. Yet, sometimes youth need a place or an experience that simply doesn't tear them down or hurt them. Sometimes an experience is positive because it doesn't set you back farther like other things in your life do. How well does that describe the Wildlife Associates experience?