

Great Outdoors University (GOU) is a youth conservation education program of the Tennessee Wildlife Federation (TWF) whose mission is to connect kids with the great outdoors in meaningful, life-changing and lasting ways. GOU participants are children and youth who would not likely have the opportunity to learn about and experience the great outdoors otherwise. GOU is currently providing programming in Memphis and Nashville, with plans to expand across the state.

Program Components

GOU accomplishes its mission through conservation education, day field trips and overnight camping experiences. Day field trips take kids hiking or fishing within an hour's drive of the inner-city; however the destinations are not urban parks or nature centers. A primary goal of GOU is to expose kids to more remote and wild areas. Great Outdoors University Weekends are overnight camping experiences held in the Spring and Fall. These three-day, two-night events include courses in orienteering, archery, wilderness survival skills, aquatic systems, hiking and fishing. Follow-up curriculum and activities are also provided to further the impact of hands-on experiences.

Participants & Partners

GOU participants are sourced from partnering organizations who include outdoor education in their mission to serve low-wealth children and youth. GOU has filled a niche in order for these organizations to fulfill their mandate to provide outdoor education while serving their constituents. Adult leadership for GOU comes from a variety of sources. In addition to trip coordination by TWF staff, GOU contracts with professional naturalists and environmental educators for teaching and leading trips. Additionally, volunteers from area hunting and fishing organizations accompany most trips to serve as mentors, and participating partnering organization staff members serve as chaperones.

Partners in Memphis include:

ScoutReach - BSA's Chickasaw Council
Girls Inc.
St. George's - Memphis Campus
Youth Villages
Concord Academy
Girl Scouts
BRIDGES

Partners in Nashville include:

Oasis Center
ScoutReach - BSA of Middle Tennessee Council
Girl Scouts L.E.A.D. Program

Youth Villages
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Middle Tennessee
Metro Parks
Preston Taylor Ministries

Outcomes

Great Outdoors University is more than just taking kids out in the woods or to the lake for a day. GOU seeks to go deeper, to help develop a connection to, and an understanding of the natural world that will last far into the future. Our work is guided by recent research, particularly that of Dr. Richard Louv (*Last Child in the Woods*), that has shown children in today's urban world are suffering from "nature deficit disorder," the impact of which can lead to childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder and a general culture of stress and depression. TWF is working towards giving all the children in Tennessee the opportunity to play in and learn about the great outdoors, all while creating part of the remedy to the challenges of today's electronic culture.

Support

GOU is funded by generous donations from foundations, corporations and individuals.

Current major corporate and foundation support includes: Memphis Daily News, the Plough Foundation, the Maddox Foundation, the Memorial Foundation, and the Cracker Barrel Foundation.

Interested in Helping?

If you are interested in learning more about GOU, or volunteering with the program, please e-mail Sonya Wood Mahler, GOU Program Director, at swoodmahler@tnwf.org or call 615-353-1133.