

Certified Environmental Educator to Oversee Program That Gets Inner-City Kids Outdoors

The Tennessee Wildlife Federation has named Sonya Wood Mahler manager of the Great Outdoors University (GOU) program that provides life-changing outdoor experiences to inner-city children who otherwise may not have the opportunity.

Previously, Mahler was an aquatic education specialist with the Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife Resources, where she taught kids and adults about fishing and boating. Her experience over the course of 30 years has included stints as a naturalist at Land Between the Lakes, as a marine and coastal education agent with the University of Florida, as a program director for a 4-H marine science summer camp, and with the U.S. Forest Service as a biological technician.



“Sonya’s gift for connecting youth with the outdoors, coupled with her technical expertise as a biologist, makes her the ideal leader for the continued growth of TWF’s Great Outdoors University program,” said Peter Schutt, a TWF board member and the founder of GOU. “Children living in the inner-city neighborhoods of Memphis and Nashville can grow up having never experienced the wonders of nature, and Great Outdoors University helps facilitate this critical component of youth education. We are fortunate to have someone with Sonya’s passion directing the curriculum.”

Mahler grew up in Mobile and Orange Beach, Ala. She earned two bachelor’s degrees from Auburn University, in marine biology and physics and in secondary science education, and a

master's degree in natural resources and environmental education from the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point.

She has led 30 kayak trips and 52 manatee dive trips in waters throughout the Southeast. Her favorite trip to lead is called Seven Rivers in Seven Days, in which participants paddle seven different rivers (about 70 miles) in a week.

In 1982, Sonya received the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award, the highest honor one can receive at Auburn University, for volunteer work with the Marine Biological Society and the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program. In 1984, the Award for Outstanding Female Volunteer in Project Uplift/Big Brothers/Big Sisters at Auburn University was renamed the Sonya J. Wood Award. Sonya also received the Florida Sea Grant Meritorious Service Award in 2000 and the Alabama Governor's Award for Conservation Educator of the Year in 2006.

GOU was launched as a program of the Tennessee Wildlife Federation in 2005, partnering with non-profit organizations in Memphis and Nashville that serve low-income children and youth by providing day and weekend trips to natural places where the kids learn outdoor skills and develop relationships with peers, mentors and the great outdoors. In addition to unstructured time in the woods, GOU participants learn to fish, identify flora and fauna, hike and camp. More than 8,000 children have participated in GOU trips over the course of seven years.

It has evolved into a nationally acclaimed program, noted for its simplicity and effectiveness. Martha Lyle Ford, who has served as the program's director since its inception, is now focusing on a pilot with the National Wildlife Federation that could take GOU to states across the country.