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Oklahoma Dept. of Wildlife Conservation Honored for Diversity Outreach and Education

SEAFWA Award Recognizes Outstanding Work Introducing Schools, Diverse Youth to the Outdoors

The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) has received the 2019 Diversity Outreach and Education Award from the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA). The Oklahoma agency was recognized for forging fruitful partnerships to introduce students from diverse backgrounds to the outdoors through fishing.

“At a time when young people in cities are increasingly disconnected from nature and the outdoors, especially people of color and others who may lack access or opportunity for time in nature, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation is providing a model for many other organizations facing similar challenges across our nation,” said J. D. Strong, executive director with ODWC.

In 2017 the Department partnered with the Paul George Foundation to help introduce the Oklahoma Fishing in the Schools program into more urban classrooms. George is an NBA pro and passionate angler who at the time was playing for the Oklahoma City Thunder. Since 2011, the fishing in the schools program had recruited nearly 400 schools, and George saw a way to expand this established platform to reach more diverse urban audiences.

The agency and the foundation picked 13 new schools in the Oklahoma City metro area to be part of the new PG13 fishing program. Teachers received training to then teach the fishing in schools program in their classrooms. The 13 schools also received tickets to an Oklahoma City Thunder basketball game from the Paul George Foundation—students got a chance at a ticket by writing essays on what they love about the outdoors. The partnership grew in 2018-2019, with the foundation providing \$8,000 to cover transportation costs for participating schools.

Most of the schools involved with the Fishing in the Schools program had been mainly rural, and the partnership with the Paul George Foundation helped reach a broader and more diverse audience in an urban center. Oklahoma City school district students are 54 percent Hispanic, 22 percent African-American, 14 percent Caucasian and the rest Native American and Asian.

Many schools took advantage of the agency’s Arcadia Conservation Education Area in the northern part of the metro area. Students got to fish in the education pond and walk the three-quarter mile education trail, where students learned about different habits and species they might find in Oklahoma.

The department has since secured equipment grants for the 2019-2020 school year to add up to 40 new schools to the program in urban areas. The will help continue to grow and diversify the program, expanding from a fourth-grade focus in recent years into higher grade levels up through 12th grade.

The SEAFWA annual Diversity and Inclusion Award allows member agencies to learn from best practices implemented by other agencies, creating benchmarks of progress toward developing more inclusion among wildlife agencies across America. More information is on the [SEAFWA website](#).