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Greg Lais, co-founder and long-time executive director of Minnesota-based Wilderness Inquiry, will receive the Wilderness Education Association's 2012 Paul K. Petzoldt award for outstanding achievement in outdoor leadership. Lais will accept the award at the association's annual conference on Feb. 20 in Estes Park, CO.

"Greg's vision of wilderness exploration as an inclusive human endeavor has enabled over a quarter of a million Wilderness Inquiry participants to develop appreciation and love, both for the wilderness and for their companions on the journey," said WEA president Mike McGowan, who announced the award. "They are a testament to his vision of a world where exploring, cherishing and protecting wilderness are a human birthright for everyone."

Lais has been the chief architect of Wilderness Inquiry's vision and programs since the non-profit's creation over 30 years ago. Its commitment to connecting people of all backgrounds and abilities to wild places thus well before the passage of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act which brought the notion of accessible public places and spaces to serious national attention.

Lais himself has led over 150 such wilderness adventures, most including a mix of able-bodied people and those with physical, cognitive and emotional disabilities. In addition to its wide range of programs for people of all physical abilities, Wilderness Inquiry, in cooperation with the National Park Service and others, has launched a very successful effort to help youth in urban areas explore natural environments on an unprecedented scale. The Urban Wilderness Canoe Adventures (UWCA) program has been highlighted in President Obama's America's Great Outdoors initiative as well as First Lady Michele Obama's Let's Move initiative.

"Greg's has been a commitment to helping people escape stereotypes and to do things no one thought possible," said McGowan. "He has also authored seminal works on inclusive wilderness access programs and his organization has produced reports to the Congress and to federal land management agencies." Lais is on the faculty of the University of Minnesota. He lectures in university classes across the Midwest and is a popular presenter at conferences on outdoor leadership, access and wilderness travel.

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The first Wilderness Inquiry programs relied on Lais's backyard (and still favorite) wilderness, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, as well as the Quetico Provincial Park and other relatively nearby Ontario waters. Today, the non-profit group operates in wild places across the U.S as well as in a number of foreign countries, from Africa to the Yukon. The methods of travel are as varied as the venues: canoes, sea kayaks, white- water rafts, dogsleds, horses, and hiking boots.

"I am deeply honored to be recognized in this way by the Wilderness Education Association. Paul Petzoldt is a hero of mine, especially because he did things that no one thought was possible at the time," said Lais when asked about this award.

Paul K. Petzoldt, for whom the WEA award is named, was a legendary Wyoming mountaineer, guide and outdoor educator. He climbed the Grand Teton in 1924—wearing cowboy boots. He was a member of the first American expedition to scale K2 in the Himalayas in 1938 and served in the U.S. Army's famed 10th Mountain Division in World War II. He was the chief instructor of the first Outward Bound program in the U.S. and went on to found both the National Outdoor Leadership School and the Wilderness Education Association.

Lais joins an impressive list of past recipients of the WEA's Petzoldt Award, including Yvon Chouinard, environmentalist and founder of the Patagonia Co.; Glenn Exum, another famed Teton mountaineer; David Brower, one of the 20th Century's most influential environmentalists; and, Bill McKibben, author and environment activist. Lais and his wife, Patti Thurber, a teacher in the Saint Paul Public Schools, live in Minneapolis and have two children, Rosie and Martin.

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The Wilderness Education Association is a national not-for-profit organization the mission of which is to promote the professionalism of outdoor leadership through establishment of national standards, curriculum design, implementation, advocacy and research-driven initiatives. Its headquarters are in Burlington, VT. On the Web at <http://www.weainfo.org>.