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JH Wild redefines brand and mission

Wildlife film festival doubles down on global impact.

By Billy Arnold

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Lisa Samford has been executive director of the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival since 2002. The nonprofit announced an organizational name change last week and redirected its mission to focus on the global stage.

RYAN DORGAN / NEWS&GUIDE FILE

As of last week, the nonprofit once known as the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival has announced a new name — Jackson Wild — and a revitalized purpose: to cultivate media-centric events and partnerships capable of creating global change.

“It’s a pivot, a redefining of our mission,” Jackson Wild Executive Director Lisa Samford said.

The nonprofit has been transforming for years, expanding its programming to include local events like the popular TEDxJacksonHole. It has also built bridges with the Arapaho tribe on the Wind River Reservation, facilitating a cultural exchange.

As the organization's programming has morphed, so has its name. In the past few years the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival has operated locally as Jackson Hole Wild, or JH Wild. But with this latest and formal announcement of its rebranding, the nonprofit is clarifying not only its name, but its mission.

As part of that shift, Jackson Wild's flagship event, the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival and Conservation Summit, will become the Jackson Wild Summit. While essentially the same program, the summit will be held annually, rather than biennially, as it has been for 28 years.

The 2019 summit is still slated for September at Jackson Lake Lodge. The 2020 summit will be held out of the country, kicking off a new tradition of hosting the event internationally in even years and in Jackson Hole in odd ones.

"It's not that we're turning away from Jackson Hole," Samford said. "We're just looking toward where we can make the deepest possible impact with our organization while we recognize that local impact can be handled very well with local partners."

Local programs shift

The Center of Wonder will take over the local programming previously run through the film festival. That portfolio includes TEDx, Wild Fest, Science Fest and a partnership with the Wind River Reservation's Arapahoe Middle School.

Gary Silberberg, a co-founder of and board member of the Center of Wonder, called the programming his nonprofit is preparing to take over "well orchestrated."

"Other than to expand and deepen the impact with the audience we're not looking to make major changes to the programs themselves," Silberberg said.

Samford saw the shift as the "best of both worlds."

"The local programming is worthy of an organization that includes it as a primary programming priority, not a secondary one," she said.

While the details of the transition have yet to be ironed out, Silberberg confirmed that some kind of download of programming-related expertise from Jackson Wild to the Center of Wonder is in the works.

“We’re looking to work with those same people who were carrying [the local programs] out, whether it’s under our umbrella or collaboratively as partners,” he said.

Wild impact

Jackson Wild will continue running the annual media competition — now called the Jackson Wild Media Awards — that was formerly the underpinning of the summit. Award winners will be announced every year at the now-annual summits, whether in Jackson or elsewhere.

Samford and her team will also double down on their efforts to use the awarded media as a tool for global change.

“The planet is in danger, and the only way we have a chance of success is if the broad population of our planet gets engaged,” Samford said. “Media can do that.”

Regardless of its name, the nonprofit has cultivated strong ties with the U.S. Department of State and the United Nations. Under its new mission, the organization will seek to leverage those connections to place showings of conservation-oriented media in front of policymakers across the globe.

“[Media] helps to get information across to the influencers, the policymakers, and it inspires people to make a difference in the world,” Samford said.

The organization’s executive director is in talks to schedule showcases with at least two global assemblies. If successfully launched, those events would have the potential to place media aimed at effecting change in front of upwards of 10,000 international decision-makers and stakeholders.

In addition to media competitions and screenings, Jackson Wild will also launch a series of media labs and work with global partners to arrange sister summits in places like South America and South Africa.

Though Jackson Wild is pivoting from local to global undertakings, Samford said the organization has not lost sight of its home base.

“Jackson is more than just a place to come ski or take pictures,” she said. “It is really a shining example of how to create a sustainable community anchored in and around the protection and conservation of natural resources.”

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