



NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE

STRATEGIC PLAN 2026 – 2028

Approved by the Board of Directors: November 15, 2025

VISION: Healthy Northwest ecosystems where all communities and species thrive

MISSION: To inspire environmental stewardship through transformative learning experiences in nature

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND:

Rationale: As North Cascades Institute (NCI) reflects on its past and looks to the future, the organization recognizes that it has been spread too thin and requires greater clarity and focus in its work. Over the past five years, NCI has faced many challenges, including changing student and teacher needs, fires, staffing and housing shortages, a global pandemic, and more. And yet the organization remains steadfast in its commitment to environmental education. At the same time, the world is changing rapidly, with new opportunities emerging that are relevant to NCI's mission and impact. In this pivotal time, this new strategic plan will guide the organization in strengthening its impact and increasing its resilience.

External Context and Trends: NCI operates within a rapidly changing landscape that demands both clarity and adaptability. The demographics of the region are shifting, with trends including increasing racial diversity, shifts from urban to rural areas, an aging population, and declining student enrollments, which are all reshaping the needs and expectations of the teachers and students NCI serves. Simultaneously, widespread adoption of new technologies, such as digital learning platforms, ubiquitous cell phone access, and AI tools, is transforming education and creating both challenges and opportunities for environmental education. At the same time, NCI faces uncertainty around regulatory changes, funding sources, changing workforce expectations, regional housing shortages, and climate change impacts, such as wildfires and flooding.

Organizational Transition: NCI also recognizes the significance of welcoming a new Executive Director five years ago—the first to take over leadership from the Institute's co-founder, Saul Weisberg, after his 35 years of service. The organization also recently instituted board term limits. While this was a healthy organizational decision, it resulted in the turnover of many long-term knowledge holders. These leadership transitions, combined with the external opportunities and challenges listed above, underscore the critical importance of this foundational strategic planning process.

AREAS OF FOCUS:

Mission & Impact: While the diversity of current programming has helped the organization weather the ups and downs of the last several years, NCI has reached a point where it needs to clarify its mission, vision, values, and high-level impact. Through this process, the organization will also define its key outcomes and priority audiences, which will help focus resources to strengthen programs. As part of this work, NCI will develop its systems for program evaluation and decision-making to balance program goals with the need for financial and staff stability.

Welcoming & Belonging: While NCI has made progress on its commitment to welcoming and belonging over the past several years, the organization recognizes the need to develop a shared understanding and plan for integrating welcoming and belonging across all facets of the organization. The first step is to develop a definition and vision for what welcoming and belonging mean at NCI, which will inform goals,

action plans, and systems for measuring progress. NCI recognizes the value and importance of people from diverse communities, backgrounds, and identities, and looks forward to strengthening its culture of welcoming and belonging throughout the organization.

Financial Sustainability: To ensure NCI remains resilient in dynamic times, the organization recognizes the need to create an adaptable, multi-year financial plan. As part of this work, NCI will address its top areas of financial risk and develop clear plans to safeguard its reserves. Transitioning to multi-year financial planning will support NCI in maximizing program impact while ensuring effective resource management in a dynamic market.

INITIATIVES:

1. MISSION AND IMPACT

Goal: Refine our mission, vision, and values. Define the high-level impact related to the revised mission and vision so that NCI will have a clearer direction for decision-making.

Strategies:

1. Review and update, as needed, the mission, vision, and values.
2. Articulate key mission and vision outcomes and create a system to measure and track them
3. Develop a decision-making framework to maximize our mission impact while ensuring staff and financial stability.

2. FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Goal: Develop and implement a financial plan that supports adaptability and multi-year planning, enabling NCI to maximize our mission impact and resilience in a dynamic market.

Strategies:

1. Implement a risk assessment framework that identifies and addresses the top areas of financial risk.
2. Build on the identity and impact work to create a multi-year financial plan that moves NCI toward a breakeven or better budget for the duration of the strategic plan.
3. Define clear goals and philosophy around the growth, maintenance, and use of reserves and endowments.

3. WELCOMING AND BELONGING

Goal: Develop a shared commitment and plan for integrating welcoming and belonging throughout the fabric of NCI so that the Institute can even more effectively achieve its Mission.

Strategies:

1. Create a shared definition and intention statement for what welcoming and belonging mean at NCI.
2. Develop and implement a multi-year plan to advance welcoming and belonging across the organization
3. Align the representation of board, staff, and participants from diverse communities, backgrounds, and identities with our articulated commitment.