



NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE 2023 YOUTH LEADERSHIP ADVENTURES | PROGRAM REPORT

Youth Leadership Adventures (YLA) offers immersive backcountry trips for diverse local high school students. Through outdoor skills training, leadership development, and lessons focused on climate change solutions, participants gain the knowledge and tools to become environmental stewards and engage in community advocacy. By providing transformative experiences in nature to teens who otherwise likely wouldn't participate in an outdoor program, YLA helps develop a wider audience of engaged environmental enthusiasts and future climate leaders.

PROGRAM GOAL

Empowering local youth to envision and build a just and sustainable future

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

IDENTITY & EQUITY ▶ Equitable access to outdoor engagement

“ This trip was the most adventurous adventure I've experienced. I got to meet new people from different parts of Washington, I've made friends, learned camping skills, and seen the beauty of nature.



INTERDEPENDENCE ▶ Deepened connection with nature and increased awareness of our interdependence with the natural world

“ This trip has given me the opportunity to connect with my surroundings on a deeper level without distractions. I've learned that I can care for nature and it can care for me too.

LEADERSHIP & COMMUNITY ACTION

▶ Foster pathways toward community engagement focused on climate solutions, hope and collaborative action

“ Climate change is something that directly impacts every living being on the planet, not just my community. Taking action now is necessary if we want to preserve the beauty of life we have now.



Strategic Planning and Wildfire Disruptions

This was an eventful year for YLA, including both planned and unplanned activities that impacted the number of students we served in 2023.

Going into the season, we scheduled a scaled-back program while concurrently completing a large-scale strategic revisioning project. After several post-pandemic years of inconsistent enrollment, late drop-outs, and shifting challenges faced by local communities, we saw a need to redesign sections of the program to make it more accessible to our target audience of regional high schoolers from historically underserved communities.

Though YLA already addressed the most visible barriers to access—lack of backcountry experience and financial means—we identified additional barriers including:

- the length of the program, often related to students needing to work a summer job or provide childcare for younger siblings
- fear of the unknown and leaving home for an extended period of time (exacerbated by isolation during the pandemic)
- unfamiliarity/lack of trust with the program and the Institute

In 2024, we are excited to launch an expanded program that offers some shorter trips along with updated strategies for recruitment, more opportunities for alumni engagement, and new/continuing partnerships with other regional groups and organizations.

To accommodate the revisioning, we planned a scaled-back season of three YLA backcountry trips in 2023. Trip #1, a group of primarily Latine students from the GEAR UP program at Burlington-Edison High School, successfully spent nine days on a canoe-focused trip on Ross Lake. Trip #2, a multilingual group including participants from the Mount Vernon High School Migrant Student Program, was in the field when the Sourdough Fire started just half a mile from the North Cascades Environmental Learning Center. Through constant monitoring of the wildfire and safety assessments, we successfully completed Trip #2 as scheduled, though they did not return to wrap up on campus as usual due to the concurrent evacuation of the Learning Center.

With significant fire growth, extreme smoke levels, and the inability to access our supplies, we unfortunately had to cancel Trip #3 and, ultimately, all other programs held at and around the Learning Center for the remainder of the year. While it was disappointing to cancel this final trip of an already scaled-back season, the other two trips were both successful and deeply impactful for the 17 diverse high schoolers who participated.

PARTICIPANT SNAPSHOT

To ensure equitable access to backcountry experiences, we intentionally recruit YLA participants through partnerships with diverse organizations and presentations to high school classes. We provide tuition subsidies, scholarships, transportation, clothing, gear, meals, family orientations, culturally relevant curriculum, and gender-inclusive camp options to reduce barriers to participation to the greatest possible extent.

17 YLA
PARTICIPANTS

100%
RECEIVED
SCHOLARSHIPS

33% never
been to
NORTH CASCADES
NATIONAL PARK

65% qualify
for
FREE or REDUCED
-PRICE LUNCHES

184
VOLUNTEER
HOURS in National
Parks and Forests

100%
identify as
PEOPLE OF
COLOR

65%
prospective
1ST GENERATION
college students

88% paid
\$25 OR LESS

53% first
time
participating in
an OUTDOOR
PROGRAM





EVALUATING PROGRAM OUTCOMES

To gauge progress toward program outcomes, YLA participants provide qualitative and quantitative feedback through surveys and written impact statements. Their **pre- and post-program responses** illustrate the transformative experience of participation in YLA.

% WHO AGREE with these statements	BEFORE	AFTER
"I feel comfortable and confident spending time outdoors"	67%	100%
"I feel confident in my identity and aware of the unique strengths I have to contribute"	67%	93%
"I can empathize and connect with people who are different from me"	73%	100%
"I feel a sense of connection with the natural world"	73%	100%
"I think of myself as a leader"	40%	100%
"I feel confident talking about climate change with my friends and family"	47%	93%
"I can think of ways I could get involved in climate solutions in my community"	27%	100%
"I can envision a hopeful future where we have created sustainable communities where everyone can thrive"	60%	93%

Power of Diversity in the Backcountry

While the target audience for YLA has always been diverse teens who are unlikely to otherwise have an immersive backcountry experience, 2023's trips were some of the most diverse groups of students that we have worked with.

For the past several years we have worked with GEAR UP at Burlington-Edison High School, a program for prospective first-generation college students, to offer a group trip



for Latine students (Trip #1). Through a new partnership, a group of participants in Trip #2 were from Mount Vernon High School's Migrant Student Program while the other trip participants were recruited in other ways. This combination of students who were already familiar with each other and shared common backgrounds plus students from varying backgrounds was incredibly successful.

Trip #2's participants not only came from different backgrounds but also spoke different languages: as a whole, the group did not have a language in common! During their time in the backcountry, students and staff helped each other translate between English, Spanish, a Mixtec language, and Cantonese. By embracing and overcoming the language barriers, the group formed deep bonds with each other and voiced appreciation for the new perspectives they gained after making close friends with people from varied cultural backgrounds.

“It was inspiring to see the strength of a bond formed due to open minds, curious spirits, and warm smiles.

—2023 YLA Instructor

READ MORE ► Languages: Barriers or Bridges in Youth Leadership Adventures? at blog.ncascades.org

Nature Through the Lens of Art

We have worked with passionate and talented YLA instructors over the years, each of whom have put their own unique stamp on the program through their individual experiences, interests, and skills. This year's instructors, Talia and Kaylin, brought creativity with them and connected students to nature and place through lessons focused on art and poetry. This approach was exceptionally well received by participants and we look forward to including lessons on nature art and poetry in the curriculum for future years.



Sketches illustrating a participant's YLA experience



Listen to **Student Voices:**
YLA Art Projects at
ncascades.org/student-voices

I am wet climate like the weather system

*I soak up the information and relationships
from friends, family, and mentors*

*Just like the clouds start their journey
toward the mountains*

*I use information, memories, and emotions
to reach my goal until I reach the top*

*And when I do reach my goal
a sense of peace happens*

A release, no more war with myself

Just the sound of rain

A participant's poem about correlating with a season and a rock sculpture representing the impacts of climate change on a participant's family and greater community

Youth for the Environment and People! (YEP!)

Offered in partnership with RE Sources, YEP! is an extracurricular program for high school students who are interested in climate solutions and activism. RE Sources and North Cascades Institute partner to offer YEP! in Whatcom and Skagit counties.

This year's YEP! Skagit County cohort focused on flood preparedness, which they identified as a climate-related challenge relevant to their communities after the historic flooding in 2021. Using information provided by Skagit County, students created a tri-fold brochure about flood preparation and planned to distribute them during a community event. In early December, the students quickly pivoted and handed out over 50 copies to neighbors and community members in the days prior to a major flood event, providing relevant timely information on how to prepare.

DONORS AND SUPPORTERS

Youth Leadership Adventures is made possible with the generous support of hundreds of organizations and individuals including:

PARTNERS

North Cascades National Park
Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest
Seattle City Light
Ross Lake Resort
Burlington-Edison GEAR UP
Mount Vernon High School Migrant Student Program
Skagit Valley College
Vamos Outdoors Project
RE Sources
Swinomish Indian Tribal Community – Department of Environmental Protection

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