

NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE YOUTH LEADERSHIP ADVENTURES

2025

PROGRAM REPORT

Youth Leadership Adventures (YLA) works with diverse regional teenagers, providing wilderness recreation, leadership development, and climate change education to youth who might not otherwise have these opportunities.

The core of YLA is backcountry trips: 5- and 8-day entry-level backpacking and canoe-camping trips throughout the North Cascades, where participants learn how to safely and confidently recreate in the wilderness. While immersed in the beauty of North Cascades National Park and Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, students engage in activities and lessons designed to help them explore their own identities, connect with each other and the natural world, understand and develop leadership skills, and learn about climate change, conservation, and environmental stewardship.

Beyond backcountry trips, we work with community partners to offer complementary programming that aligns with YLA's overarching goal and curriculum outcome areas.

OVERARCHING GOAL

Welcoming young leaders to connect with nature and be a part of building a just and sustainable future

CURRICULUM OUTCOME AREAS

IDENTITY & EQUITY

Equitable access to outdoor engagement

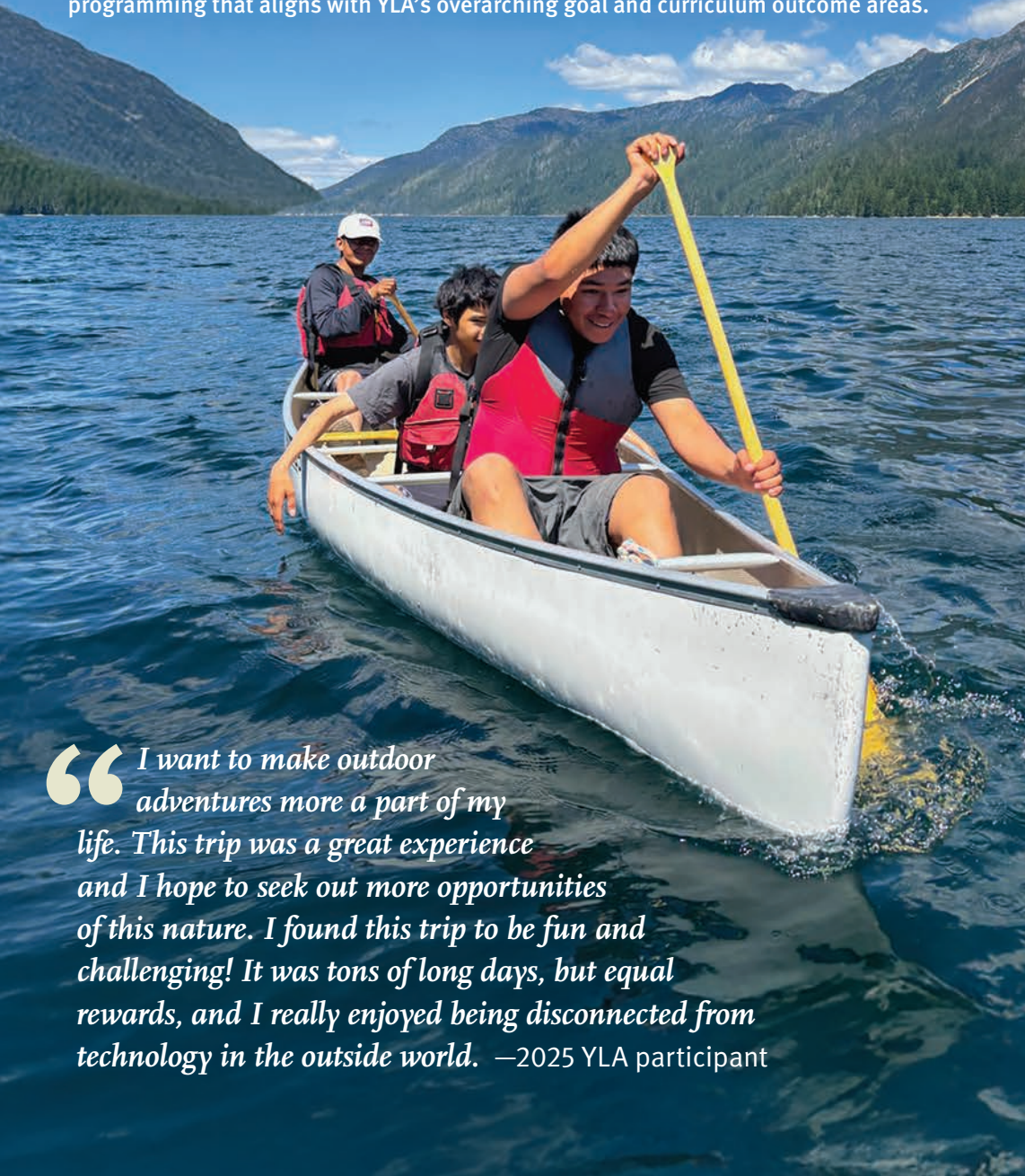
INTERDEPENDENCE

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

LEADERSHIP & COMMUNITY ACTION

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

“ *I want to make outdoor adventures more a part of my life. This trip was a great experience and I hope to seek out more opportunities of this nature. I found this trip to be fun and challenging! It was tons of long days, but equal rewards, and I really enjoyed being disconnected from technology in the outside world.* —2025 YLA participant



PARTICIPANT SNAPSHOT

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

In 2025, we offered 9 backcountry trips, serving 76 participants.

76

BACKCOUNTRY TRIP PARTICIPANTS

We also worked with **136 participants** through other related programs and partnerships.

86%
RECEIVED
SCHOLARSHIPS

37% never
been to
NORTH CASCADES
NATIONAL PARK

56% first
time
participating in
an **OUTDOOR
PROGRAM**

54%
identify as
**PEOPLE OF
COLOR**

470
VOLUNTEER
HOURS in National
Parks and Forests

32%
prospective
1ST GENERATION
college students

51% qualify
for
**FREE or REDUCED
-PRICE LUNCHES**

57% paid
\$20 OR LESS
in tuition



Service Work in a Challenging Year

Service projects are a long-standing component of YLA. The trails and campsites that backcountry trip participants visit in North Cascades National Park and Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest are heavily used for summer recreation and require constant upkeep. During 8-day trips, participants typically work alongside National Park and Forest Service staff to support the maintenance of this public recreation infrastructure.

In 2025, widespread federal funding cuts and staffing shortages made YLA's service work even more impactful. Participants took on projects and general maintenance, including digging a new pit toilet, trash collecting, trail brushing & lopping, and campsite cleanup, that otherwise might not have happened this year due to the lack of staff available.

Beyond the tangible benefits, service work is also incredibly valuable for participants. Through hands-on engagement, participants gain a deeper understanding of environmental stewardship in a way that can't be replicated through signs, lectures, or lessons. It inspires them to continue giving back to public lands, take their new knowledge back to their home lives, and explore the possibility of future careers in environmental fields.

“Some students unexpectedly really loved doing the service work. They got into the task and the idea of caring for the place, and unanimously reflected on how long it took to clean up a campsite and how much work it takes to care for how many trails there are. It's really powerful for them to see how relatively little you can do in a day and then how much needs to be done.”

—2025 YLA Instructor

“We're here, we're helping how we can, and it's making a difference, especially in this context when there's so many less boots on the ground.” —2025 YLA Instructor

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

To broaden YLA's reach and impact, we partner with other community organizations throughout the year on a wide range of programs and initiatives. We recruit trip participants through partnership work and these programs hold significant value of their own through supporting youth from under-resourced backgrounds, breaking down barriers to outdoor recreation, developing future climate change leaders, and more.

- The **Burlington-Edison High School Career Center** recruited YLA trip participants as well as invited our staff to engage with students through tutoring and presentations.
- **Glacier Peak Institute** helped recruit YLA trip participants from the Darrington area, while we offered training for their Americorps staff.
- **Mount Vernon Migrant Student Program, Rainier Beach High School, and Triumph Teen Life Center** recruited groups of students to participate in backcountry trips together and helped secure mentors to assist multilingual students.
- In addition to continued partnership through the Champions of Diversity awards program, which offers backcountry trip scholarships to students making a difference in their communities, **Skagit Valley College** welcomed YLA staff to attend and present at their first annual leadership conference for local youth.
- We engaged with students at **Whatcom Intergenerational High School** through their annual Forest School, where we helped plan curriculum, loaned outdoor gear, and taught lessons.
- YLA staff facilitated local student participation in the **YMCA Seattle Youth Environmental Service Corps'** annual symposium.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT: Youth for the Environment and People! (YEP!)

YEP! is an extracurricular climate change solutions program for high schoolers, offered in partnership with **RE Sources**. Participants learn about climate change solutions, attend field days exploring work already being done in the community, and complete a climate solutions action project. This year's participants learned about regenerative agriculture and how farming practices and food systems are part of climate justice solutions. As a culminating project, students produced a video interviewing local farmers from Long Hearing Farm and City Sprouts Farm about their work related to climate-resilient food systems.



PARTNER SPOTLIGHT: Recorrido por el Río (River Journey)

Recorrido por el Río is a bilingual salmon education program offered in partnership with **Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group, Vamos Outdoors Project, and the Salish Sea School** as part of a larger culvert project. In 2025-26, students from the **Mount Vernon Migrant Student Program** have opportunities for immersive watershed experiences: an overnight at the Learning Center to engage with the glaciers and headwaters of the Upper Skagit watershed, programming focused on the Skagit River in Marblemount, and exploring the shores of the Salish Sea. Students will also visit the culvert project with Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group and develop bilingual interpretive signage.

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 like spending time in nature"	76%	100%
"I think of myself as part of nature, not separate from it"	59%	86%
"I can empathize and connect with people who are different from me"	70%	93%
"I understand how climate and environmental changes affect my life and community"	68%	97%
"I think of myself as a leader"	41%	74%
"I am excited to talk to people I know about climate change and protecting the environment"	44%	76%
"I feel motivated to make my community a better place"	68%	94%

"YLA was a reminder of what we are fighting for when we advocate to solve climate change. I realized just how beautiful the planet can be and how easily we can damage it. Because I know it is hard for individuals to make change, I want to use my voice as a member of my community, state, and country to combat climate change using the government, and YLA gave me the inspiration to do so."

—2025 YLA participant

SPECIAL THANKS to Gear Aid for their long-time support! In addition to providing the products that keep our gear clean and functional, this year Gear Aid donated new packs for backcountry trips to ensure that we can provide well-fitting equipment for participants.



DONORS AND SUPPORTERS

YLA is made possible with the generous support of hundreds of organizations and individuals, including:



Named Scholarships

Adam Bates Youth Leadership Scholarship

Andrew Goodwill Murphy Memorial Scholarship

Ann Zwinger Scholarship

Beau MacGregor Youth Leadership Scholarship

Booth Family Scholarship

Campbell-Dalton Scholarship

Cook & Sullivan Scholarship

Darby Foundation Scholarship

Darvill Youth Leadership Scholarship

Franklin Bradshaw Scholarship

Gary M. Peterson Memorial Scholarship

James L. Reed Scholarship

Jeremiah Alexander Youth Leadership Scholarship

John Miles Scholarship

Jubilation Scholarship

Lorrie Otto Scholarship

Mac & Linda MacGregor Scholarship

The Schweickart Family Scholarship

WA Native Plant Society Salal Chapter Scholarship

Weisberg Family Scholarship

Grants

Anonymous Foundation

The Burning Foundation

D.V. and Ida J. McEachern Charitable Trust

Helen Martha Schiff Foundation

Henry M. Jackson Foundation

Horizons Foundation

Kate Svitek Memorial Foundation

National Forest Foundation

The Peach Foundation

Skagit Community Foundation: The ERAC Donor Advised Fund

Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission

Swinomish Indian Tribal Community

Tulip Tribes Charitable Contributions

Whatcom Community Foundation - Youth Philanthropy Project



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