



NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE



Kim Nelson

2023 ANNUAL REPORT



2023

FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Fireweed has been one of my favorite flowers since I was young. I not only appreciate its beauty, but also the vital role it plays in a healthy ecosystem. As its name suggests, fireweed is among the first plants to return after a fire or other land disturbance. It begins the process of restoration by establishing a stabilizing root system that prevents erosion and lays the groundwork for new plants to grow and thrive!

I see similarities between fireweed and North Cascades Institute. We've endured many challenges over the past few years, including a literal wildfire that shut down the Environmental Learning Center in late August 2023. Like fireweed, we have strong roots, and we remain resilient.

Wildfires can be devastating, yet they also provide a pause—time for nutrients to be added back to the soil—and then opportunities for new life to emerge. For us, this looked like expanding curriculum for 5th graders and including a fire ecology lesson, working on infrastructure upgrades on our campus and staff housing, preparing an expansion of Youth Leadership Adventures, welcoming new Board members and exploring ways to increase our resilience as we continue to adapt to a changing climate.

In addition to a robust root system allowing it to survive the harshest conditions, each fireweed stalk can release nearly 80,000 seeds that travel far and wide. So does North Cascades Institute. Our programs plant thousands of seeds of environmental awareness each year, resulting in meaningful impacts through-

out communities. We prepare the soil and create safe spaces for people of all ages and backgrounds to learn, explore, heal, and grow together.

One thing about our work that stands out for me is the diversity of groups that we serve in such a wide range of settings across the North Cascades ecosystem. For instance, a group of Skagit Valley high school students canoeing on Ross Lake. Small groups of adults identifying mushrooms in the Chuckanuts and snakes in the Methow Valley. A “Nature Immersion” group offering education for Indigenous and BIPOC youth at the Environmental Learning Center. The list goes on and on.

I am proud of the many successes and thousands of people we reached in 2023 and am excited for you to learn more about our program highlights in the pages ahead.

Bec Detrich, Executive Director

[Jump to 2023 FINANCIAL STATEMENTS](#)

2023 PROGRAM IMPACTS

Mountain School

This immersive environmental education program for 5th grade classes has been serving regional schools since 1990. Through hands-on interdisciplinary activities, students are connected to the natural and cultural history of our region, form connections with their classmates and the environment, and sharpen their understanding of their own identities.

In **Spring 2023**, we modified our schedule from 3-day/2-night to 2-day/1-night programming to serve students for whom programs had been canceled in Fall 2022 due to smoke from two nearby wildfires. This resulted in serving students from 15 schools with shorter programs. We also debuted our new curriculum "North Cascades Connections," which presents a theme of Interconnection between students, the North Cascades bioregion and the places that they call home.

Our **Fall 2023** Mountain School season sadly had to be canceled due to the Sourdough Fire. An additional 1,500 students, chaperones, and teachers would have visited the Learning Center this season; some have rescheduled for 2024 while others have found alternative programs in their school year.

Learn more in the 2022-23 Mountain School Report at ncascades.org/reports.



1,769

STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

5,285

LEARNER DAYS

“The waterfall was my favorite part of Mountain School. It was not any normal waterfall, it was huge and it plummeted down to the stream below so fast that I couldn't follow it while my face was delighted to feel the droplets of water that ran astray.

—Mountain School student

Adult and Family Programs

Our robust lineup of **Family Getaways**, **Base Camps**, **Field Excursions** and **Skagit Tours** bring diverse, multi-generational audiences to the North Cascades ecosystem to learn, recreate and be inspired. We also reach people regionally and across the country through **Online Classes**—inexpensive presentations from experts in a wide range of disciplines including art, biology, poetry and conservation.

We co-hosted nine readings by authors, artists and scientists with Village Books in the **Nature of Writing Speaker Series**, and produced two book-launch celebrations in Bellingham for John Miles' **Teaching in the Rain: The Story of North Cascades Institute**. These two events attracted more than 200 people, including a wide range of staff, graduate and youth programs alumni to celebrate the Institute's storied legacy of environmental education and getting people outside!

With the Sourdough Fire closing the Learning Center we had to cancel many sold-out Summer and Fall programs. Additional Field and Online programs were added to help make up for this loss.



1,989

PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

2,365

LEARNER DAYS

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.

In 2023, we hosted two backcountry trips and completed a strategic revisioning project to make the program more accessible for students from historically underserved communities. Our first group was primarily Latine students from the GEAR UP program at Burlington-Edison High School. Our second group was all multilingual students from Mount Vernon High School. Both of these trips were deeply impactful. Due to the Sourdough Fire, we unfortunately had to cancel a third trip.

Opportunities for engagement after the summer included **Youth for People and the Environment (YEP!)** in partnership with RE Sources. Our cohort of Skagit County students identified flood risk as the focus for their climate action project, creating a brochure about flood preparation and distributing it in the community. The students also went on a field trip to the Kukutali Preserve to learn about Indigenous food sovereignty with the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community.

Hear students reflect on their experiences in YLA's podcast and video content at ncascades.org/student-voices. Read the 2023 YLA report at ncascades.org/reports.



200

LEARNER
DAYS

26

PROGRAM
PARTICIPANTS

“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.”

—YLA participant

Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education's Connections

This program provides Whatcom County students outdoor opportunities to explore, learn, and connect with nature near their schools. Connections started during the school closures in 2020 when nonprofits banded together to address academic inequities magnified by COVID. Through providing locally-focused outdoor education **for elementary schools in the rural Mount Baker and Blaine school districts** in 2023, Connections fosters environmental stewardship and joyful habits of outdoor exploration that are strongly linked to academic and social emotional learning. Participating 5th/6th grade students attended Mountain School as a capstone experience to their outdoor education journey.

Learn more in the 2022-2023 Connections Report at ncascades.org/reports.

Bookstores

We operate seven retail stores within and adjacent to North Cascades National Park, and online at ncascades.org/shop. In 2023, we had new visitation and sales records, even with some stores temporarily closed due to the Sourdough Fire. This partnership reaches larger, broader audiences to foster a deeper connection with nature via educational resources while helping fund our programs.

Conferences and Retreats

Custom educational programs, lodging and meals at the Environmental Learning Center inspire reflection and connection to the natural world as well as to each other. We welcome conferences, events, retreats, workshops, trainings, reunions and other gatherings. In 2023, we hosted 15 programs including wellness retreats, business and academic conferences, medical training courses and outdoor immersion excursions for diverse youth groups. Groups included:

Remote Medical Training

- wilderness first aid courses

Bellingham School District

- executive board retreat

Boyz N The Wood - free immersive nature retreats for Black men

The Wilderness Society

- staff retreat

Nature Immersion

- education programming serving Indigenous and BIPOC youth

YogaBliss - yoga retreat

TRIO Upward Bound - WSU program for high school students

Seattle City Light

- dam relicensing process workshop for partners

Sierra Club - outdoor adventure retreats

UNIQUE IN 2023

Sourdough Fire

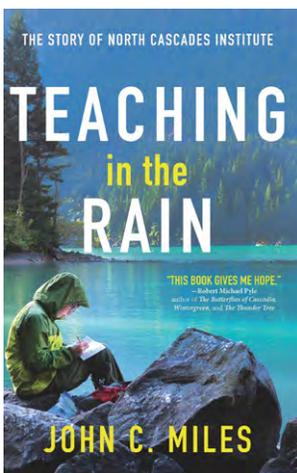
In early August 2023, we were evacuated from the Environmental Learning Center due to the Sourdough Fire. In late August our Board of Directors chose to suspend all programming based at the Environmental Learning Center until the end of the calendar year. This gut-wrenching decision was made only after we had evaluated other alternatives—including sites for Mountain School—that all proved to be untenable at such short notice. It also forced us to lay off seasonal and operations staff at the Learning Center.

Once we were able to return to campus in late Fall, we spent time cleaning up and making repairs including fixing broken water pipes, cleaning and reorganizing facilities, overhauling our heat system and other necessary projects. We also made major efficiency improvements to staff housing in Marblemount. Our decision to proactively cancel the rest of 2023 Learning Center-based programming allowed time for these necessary improvements which build resiliency and capacity over the long-term.



Britt Coy

John Miles' *Teaching In The Rain*



In the early 1980s, five young men who loved teaching, the natural world and the North Cascades dreamed of creating a field school to teach about the place and its many natural and cultural histories. North Cascades Institute emerged from that dream in 1986 with the help of North Cascades National Park. *Teaching in the Rain: The Story of North Cascades Institute* is a new book by John Miles, professor emeritus at WWU's College of the Environment, environmental historian and our very first Board Chair! It tells the story of how the Institute grew

from humble beginnings to become a model nonprofit environmental education organization admired throughout the United States. Over the 35 years chronicled in this book, the Institute served over 150,000 students in its Mountain School and youth programs!

Miles was part of this story and provides unique insights into how our success has been earned through imagination, hard work, collaboration and persistence. To have him write the history of our first 35 years is a great honor, an inspiration for other nonprofits and a time capsule for the future.

For more info and to purchase a copy, visit ncascades.org/john-miles.

“*Teaching in the Rain is a singular summary of the North Cascades Institute, one of Washington State's most unique, successful, and sustained organizations. This important book is an essential guide to what it takes to direct education meaningfully in this age of environmental stress and to marshal the common ground of community to develop skills and shape attitudes necessary to address the environmental challenges we all face.*

—Tony Angell, Artist and Educator

“*Teaching in the Rain will stir happy memories for alumni of North Cascades Institute programs, while also providing a peek behind the curtain, revealing the sometimes-uncertain trajectory of the scrappy nonprofit that—at least to this participant—always presented itself as an assured professional.*

—Mary Vermillion, *Cascadia Daily News*

In Memoriam Charles Claassen

On July 27, 2023, the Institute's chef and friend Charles Claassen died in a paddleboarding accident on the Skagit River. Charles was a beloved member of the North Cascades Institute family. He was a hard-working and talented chef who was instrumental in helping to open the Environmental Learning Center in 2005, and served on staff for more than five years in two tenures. He was the main motivator behind our local Foodshed Initiative and our goal of using food choices as an educational tool for everyone who visits our dining hall.

Charles left the Institute in 2009 and, among other things, owned the Book Fare Cafe in Village Books in Bellingham and hiked the Pacific Crest Trail. After more than a decade of raising his family in Bellingham, Charles returned to the Institute in 2022 as Chef and Food Service Manager. His return to the kitchen for a second tenure raised all of our spirits and we're grateful to have had him in our community once again. He is missed by many.



Read a tribute to Charles on our blog at blog.ncascades.org/institute-news/in-memoriam-charles-claassen.

Charles exemplified the early spirit of the Environmental Learning Center's opening when we all were just trying to figure things out. He was the most amazing addition to the team, figuring out our food menus, setting up suppliers, purchasing all the dining wares and kitchen equipment, cooking delicious meals mostly by himself—Charles did it all! And he and his family were such a grounding influence, his two little daughters and his wife brought the family vibes and we all benefited from it.

—Saul Weisberg, Institute founder and former Executive Director

Reducing Our Carbon Footprint

Our staff and Board of Directors recognize climate change as the greatest threat to the well-being of our natural environment, and we are committed to doing all we can to slow climate change through our own actions. In 2023, based on an analysis and set of recommendations from the Peak Sustainability Group—funded in part by the Saul Weisberg Catalyst Fund—we are taking action for reducing our carbon footprint:

- reducing the Institute's burning of fossil fuels
- improving efficiencies in our staff housing
- offsetting carbon emissions that we cannot impact by purchasing carbon offsets that invest in projects directly reducing greenhouse gasses

Read more at ncascades.org/carbon-footprint. This is just the beginning of our climate reduction journey.

Thank You to Our Board of Directors

Long-serving Board Members Nan McKay, Gerry Cook and Dunham Gooding reached the end of their tenures when our Board of Directors implemented term limits in 2023. Find a tribute to this formidable trio of visionary leaders by Institute founder and former Executive Director Saul Weisberg on our blog at blog.ncascades.org/institute-news/tribute-to-board-members.

We also want to recognize Michael Liang, Maureen Ryan and Priya Nanjappa for their service on the Board as they move on to other adventures, and welcome new board members who joined us in 2023: Colleen McShane, Denice Rochelle and Nina Smith.

Outdoor Schools for All

Outdoor Schools Washington, a program of the Washington School Principals' Education Foundation, is a primary partner in the statewide movement to ensure that *all* students in Washington have the opportunity to attend an overnight outdoor school program like the Institute's Mountain School. After the Sourdough Fire, Outdoor Schools Washington recognized both the need for us to cancel for students' safety and well-being as well as the significant impact that this cancellation had on our budget. Their cancellation support grant allowed us to spend the Fall working on refining Mountain School's curriculum and program structure and preparing to welcome kids back in 2024.

Outreach

Thanks to the hiring of Director of Inclusion and Community Partnerships Alma Busby-Williams and Outreach Coordinator Britt Coy, we increased our presence at diverse events including the HBCU Environmental Justice Conference, Seattle farmers markets, the El Grito celebration at Skagit Valley College, the annual Outdoor Afro fundraiser in Oakland, Village Books readings and Pint Night fund-raisers at Aslan and Wander Community Tuesday. This allowed us to help more than 2,500 people know more about the North Cascades ecosystem and our educational programs.

2023 PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS

Many thanks to over 900 individuals, families, businesses, and organizations whose financial contributions helped make North Cascades Institute programs possible. Your support allowed more people to connect with nature, build community, and become lifelong environmental stewards. The following list acknowledges anyone who donated \$100 or more in 2023. Thank you so much!

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Kim Nelson

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**Seattle
City Light**



Skagit
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Endowment
Commission



Whatcom
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Environmental
Education

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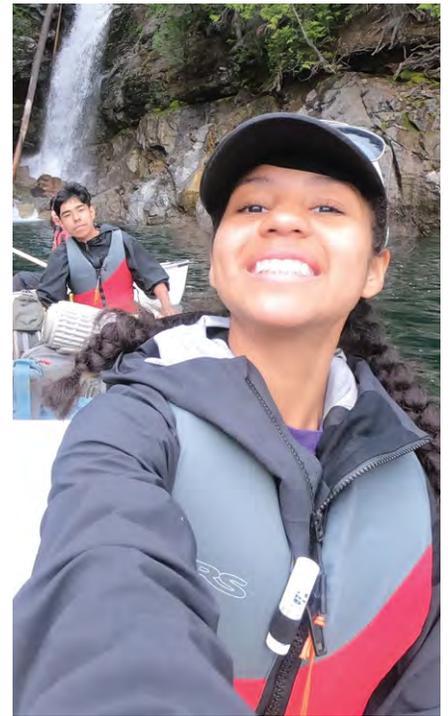
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- Wander Brewing
- Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office
- Whatcom Community Foundation
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- David and Peggy Yost
- ❖ Dr. Susan Zwinger
- Suze Woolf and Steve Price

❖ **Headwaters Legacy Circle Member**
who has named North Cascades Institute
as a beneficiary in their estate plans

2023 UNAUDITED FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

The audited 2023 Financial Statements will be posted at ncascades.org/reports when ready.

Statement of Financial Position

ASSETS

Cash and cash equivalents	\$184,094
Short-term investments	\$248,159
Receivables, net	\$484,622
Inventory and other	\$330,301
Long-term investments	\$6,854,688
Property and equipment, net	\$808,777
	\$8,910,641

LIABILITIES

Accounts payable	\$66,753
Accrued expenses	\$170,964
Deferred revenue and other	\$75,539
Lease Liability	\$158,885
	\$472,141

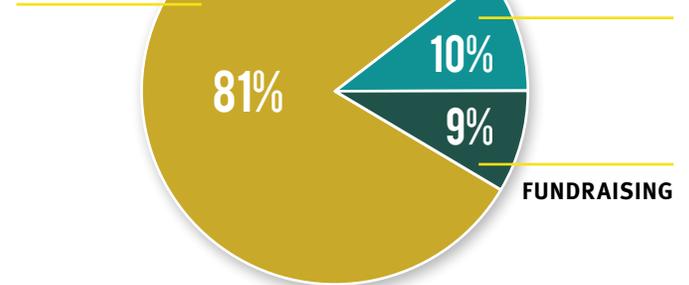
NET ASSETS

Operating Reserve	\$2,215,000
Unrestricted & temporarily restricted funds	\$2,654,824
Designated Funds:	
Conservation Education Fund	\$1,713,739
Nugent Family Fund	\$656,458
Youth Leadership Fund (Ginny Darvill)	\$170,000
Darby Foundation Scholarship Fund	\$80,000
North Cascades Conservation Council Founders Fund	\$40,000
Andrew Goodwill Murphy Memorial Fund	\$52,131
John Miles Scholarship Fund	\$42,536
Weisberg Family Fund	\$63,657
Gary Peterson Memorial Fund	\$26,268
Jean Gorton Memorial Fund	\$21,863
Cook & Sullivan Fund	\$30,500
Brian Scheuch Memorial Fund	\$29,155
Campbell-Dalton Fund	\$73,639
Mac & Linda MacGregor Fund	\$54,852
Saul Weisberg Catalyst Fund	\$513,851
	\$8,438,500

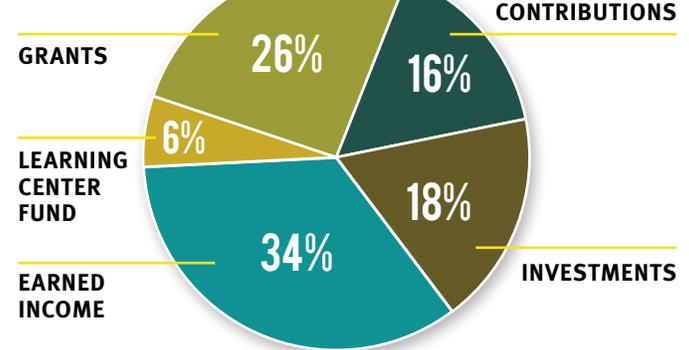
Total Liabilities and Net Assets **\$8,910,641**

Expenses

PROGRAMS



Revenue



Statement of Activities

SUPPORT AND REVENUES

Contracts, tuition and fees, net	\$1,101,786
Investment income	\$888,260
Contributions	\$699,285
Government grants	\$926,974
In-kind contributions	\$87,755
Learning Center Fund - Seattle Foundation	\$295,000
Foundation grants	\$354,000
Rental Income	\$58,038
Bookstores (retail/outreach), net	\$551,728
	\$4,962,826

EXPENSES

Programs	\$3,302,351
Management and general	\$422,576
Fundraising	\$350,412
	\$4,075,339

Change in Net Assets **\$887,487**



North Cascades Institute has received **FOUR-STAR ratings** from *Charity Navigator* **21 YEARS IN A ROW**

To learn how you can make a difference with your gift, call Jodi Broughton, Development & Marketing Director at (360) 854-2596 or visit ncascades.org/support