



NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE **2024** YOUTH LEADERSHIP ADVENTURES | PROGRAM REPORT

Youth Leadership Adventures (YLA) offers opportunities for diverse regional high school students to experience the benefits of time spent in nature, develop skills in outdoor recreation and leadership, and participate in environmental stewardship and climate activism.

Backcountry trips are the core of YLA: during 5- and 8-day backpacking and canoe-camping trips in the North Cascades, participants acquire the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to be comfortable and confident in the outdoors while simultaneously creating lasting friendships, practicing collaborative leadership skills, and exploring a variety of pathways toward climate solutions. 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

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 2024, we offered **9 backcountry trips**, serving **67 participants**:

84%
RECEIVED
SCHOLARSHIPS

42% never
been to
NORTH CASCADES
NATIONAL PARK

54% qualify
for
FREE or REDUCED
-PRICE LUNCHES

352
VOLUNTEER
HOURS in National
Parks and Forests

66%
identify as
PEOPLE OF
COLOR

33%
prospective
1ST GENERATION
college students

52% paid
\$15 OR LESS

61% first
time
participating in
an OUTDOOR
PROGRAM

We also worked with **117 participants** through other related programs and partnerships.



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An Updated and Improved Approach to YLA

Since it began in 2006, YLA has shifted and adapted to changing community needs while remaining focused on providing high schoolers with quality environmental education through deeply immersive backcountry trips.

In 2024, we piloted an updated approach to YLA, including a wider variety of ways to engage with local teens and opportunities for students to engage in a progression of outdoor and climate-related experiences before and after backcountry trips. This progression of experiences is designed to help break down perceived barriers to wilderness recreation and provide ongoing opportunities for students to continue spending time outdoors, learning about climate change, and being involved in their communities. Alex's YLA journey illustrates the impact of a progression of experiences.



“YLA has given me opportunity after opportunity from free swimming lessons to a five-day backpacking trip, and even paved a path for me to help make a difference in climate awareness through the YEP! program. —Alex

ALEX'S YLA JOURNEY

After School Tutoring

A student at Burlington-Edison High School, we first met Alex through GEAR UP (a program supporting prospective first-generation college students), who had welcomed YLA staff to help out with an after school tutoring program.



Alex

Swimming Lessons

Through tutoring and GEAR UP, Alex signed up to participate in swim lessons at the Skagit Valley YMCA (a free program, offered in partnership with the Institute, YMCA, and Vamos Outdoors Project).



Alex and other participants at the Skagit Valley YMCA

YEP!

After his backcountry trip, Alex enthusiastically joined the Skagit cohort of Youth for the Environment and People! (YEP!).

Through YEP!, he learned about ecological forestry and participated in a climate activism project.

Alex during a YEP! field day



Backpacking Trip

After building skills in swimming, Alex participated in one of our 5-day backpacking trips, where he learned outdoor recreation skills, developed closer connections to the natural world and his fellow participants, and showed leadership on an early-morning sunrise hike.

Alex's group on a hike near Park Butte



Each of the different experiences

and opportunities (listed here and in the Partnerships sidebar) hold value on their own, helping to support youth from under-resourced backgrounds and/or developing the climate change leaders of tomorrow. While most participants only join us for one or two programs, Alex's progression from homework tutoring through to YEP! is a glimpse into how offering this wide variety of experiences in partnership with other organizations can break down barriers for students to form connections to the natural world and become inspired to be environmental stewards.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Working with community partners is key to increasing the reach, impact, and sustainability of YLA. We strive to develop and maintain mutually beneficial partnerships with a wide range of organizations, schools, and nonprofits, working with different groups in different ways to best serve both partners and youth participants.

- YLA staff worked with an Environmental Science class at **Concrete High School** over the course of the fall quarter to design a composting system for the school. Students learned about composting, gathered data on the school's needs, developed prototypes, and presented their projects to a local elementary school class.
- **GEAR UP** at Burlington-Edison High School provided opportunities for our staff to engage with students, build trust, and invite participation in YLA.
- **Glacier Peak Institute** offered assistance in recruiting YLA participants in the Darrington area, while we helped train their new AmeriCorps staff.
- **Mount Vernon Migrant Student Program, Rainier Beach High School, and Triumph Teen Life Center** organized groups of students to participate in backcountry trips together and helped recruit mentors to assist multilingual students.
- **RE Sources** continued to be a valued partner in offering Youth for the Environment and People!, an afterschool program focused on climate activism, for Whatcom and Skagit county cohorts of students.
- **Skagit Valley College's Champions of Diversity** awards program gave us the opportunity to offer backcountry trip scholarships to students making a difference in their communities.
- **Vamos Outdoors Project** and **Skagit Valley YMCA** welcomed us into their existing partnership to offer swimming lessons for Latine students from Burlington-Edison High School.
- We engaged with students from **Whatcom Intergenerational High School** at their annual Forest School, where we helped plan curriculum, loaned outdoor gear, and taught lessons.
- YLA staff taught workshops and helped facilitate local student participation in the **YMCA Seattle Youth Environmental Service Corps'** two annual events.

EVALUATING PROGRAM OUTCOMES

“ I learned that I’m tougher than I think. I learned to be grateful for everything that I have. I learned that some things like social media aren't real and, for me, take away from having a full life.

—2024 YLA participant

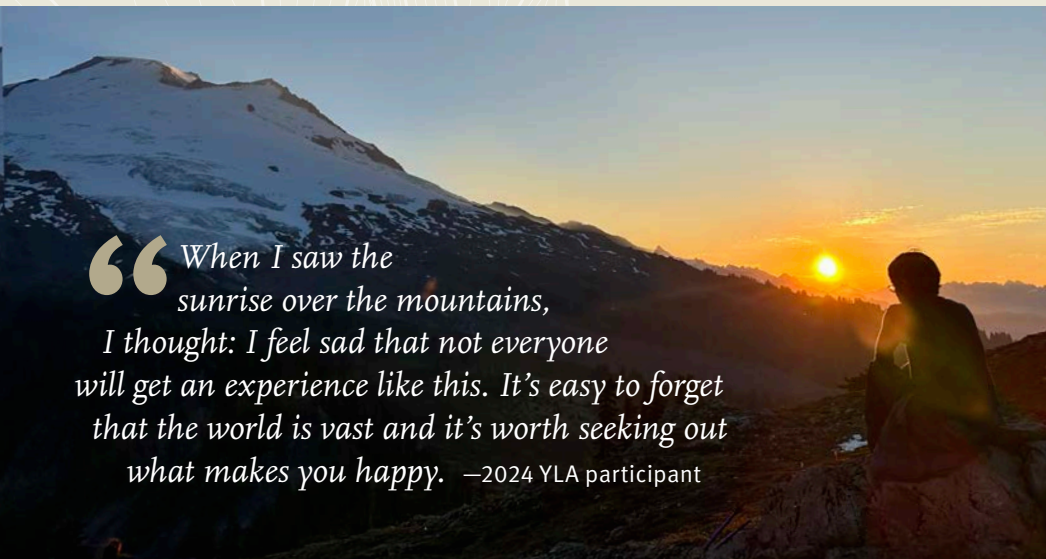


To gauge progress toward YLA’s curriculum outcomes, backcountry trip participants provide qualitative and quantitative feedback through surveys and written impact statements. Their **pre- and post-program responses** illustrate the transformative experience of participation in YLA.

PERCENTAGE WHO AGREE with these statements

	BEFORE	AFTER
"I feel comfortable and confident spending time outdoors"	80%	97%
"I feel confident seeking out outdoor spaces in my local community"	59%	97%
"I can empathize and connect with people who are different from me"	77%	92%
"I feel a sense of connection with the natural world"	78%	92%
"I think of myself as a leader"	43%	67%
"I feel confident talking about climate change with my friends and family"	70%	91%
"I can think of ways to get involved in climate solutions in my community"	64%	83%

“ When I saw the sunrise over the mountains, I thought: I feel sad that not everyone will get an experience like this. It’s easy to forget that the world is vast and it’s worth seeking out what makes you happy. —2024 YLA participant



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
- Jubilation Scholarship
- John Miles Scholarship
- Lorrie Otto Scholarship
- Mac & Linda MacGregor Scholarship
- Seeking Health Scholarship
- WA Native Plant Society Salal Chapter Scholarship
- Weisberg Family Scholarship

Grants

- Anonymous Foundation (2)
- 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
- Outdoor Youth Connections
- Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission
- Soroptimist International of Anacortes
- Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians
- Swinomish Indian Tribal Community

Other Major Donors

- Anne and Jack Middleton
- Deborah DeWolfe and Kate Stewart
- Marvin Yamaguchi and Dianne Graham
- Michelle Heng and Randy Schweickart