North Cascades Institute – shaping the next generation of environmental leaders

Since 1986, the North Cascades Institute (NCI) has focused on inspiring environmental stewardship through transformative learning experiences in nature. Its Youth Leadership Adventures (YLA) program strives to empower local youth to envision and build a just and sustainable future. Specifically, the program provides equitable access to the outdoors, a deepened connection with nature, and pathways toward community engagement around climate solutions.

For the past several years, the Foundation has made opportunity grants providing scholarships for students from military families to attend YLA. Given that in 1967, Senator Jackson introduced a bill to create North Cascades National Park, and his strong support for military families, it has been a particularly meaningful partnership.

This past summer, through nine-day backcountry field courses, about 60 high school students – diverse in income, race, gender identity, and lived experiences – connected with nature and engaged in conversations about global warming and climate change solutions. The YLA courses are made for students with no prior outdoor experience, and NCI provides all gear, food, and transportation. In recent years, 75% of participants live in the North Cascades area, yet over 50% had not previously been in a national park or forest.

Participants canoed, backpacked, camped, and completed service work projects while discovering their leadership strengths and creating an inclusive community. To build skills, participants received a new role each day of the trip: cook, cleaner, water fetcher, or leader of the day. Through hiking or paddling, completing service projects, and taking part in learning sessions, students bonded over their shared experiences and feelings – like the pride of accomplishing difficult tasks.

YLA put particular focus on creating spaces for students to talk about global warming and its effects. For example, students were asked to consider when they first started thinking about climate change, how they think about it now, and how climate change makes them feel.

At the end of a course, one student reflected, “I am bringing home knowledge and skills in the outdoors, more reformed ideas on climate change, confidence in myself, friendships I hope will last a lifetime, and so many memories. Also a bit of unwanted dirt.”

The adventurous students who participate inspire us, and we appreciate the care that NCI puts into this program. We are proud to contribute to the development of future environmental leaders through this partnership!
After a two-year hiatus resulting from COVID restrictions, we were thrilled to bring the 2020 cohort to Washington, D.C. Board Members Maria Denny and Karla Graue Pratt accompanied the cohort, as well as Foundation staff Katy Terry and Carol Vipperman. The Fellows met with a number of Foundation partners who address the climate crisis, uphold human rights, and encourage public service, such as the Center for Climate and Security, Human Rights First, and the Millennial Action Project.

In addition to our partners, we heard from former CNN Foreign Affairs Correspondent and Russia expert Jill Dougherty for a timely discussion about recent events – including the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We also met with several Washington state congressional delegation members. Senator Maria Cantwell was particularly enthusiastic about the program and cohort for inspiring public leadership; she greeted us in the historic President’s Room in the U.S. Capitol Building. We met with Representative Derek Kilmer, Representative Rick Larsen, and the Senior Legislative Counsel for Representative Suzan DelBene, as well. All spoke candidly about their work, and offered practical advice about how to be effective leaders and honor one’s values in an increasingly polarized country.

The Fellows asked challenging, thoughtful questions, and walked away with a fuller appreciation of the Foundation’s efforts and their own roles as leaders. The board members also gained insights, building stronger relationships with both the Fellows and our partners. Board Member Maria Denny explained,

"Participating in the Jackson Fellows trip to DC was personally transformative. Connecting with Foundation partners, members of the Washington delegation and all the Jackson Fellows around issues central to our mission was inspiring. We have many challenges ahead, but it is encouraging that there are people with the heart and drive to meet them."

Travelling to Washington, D.C. allowed our community of Fellows, board members, and staff to connect more deeply with the Foundation’s work and Senator Jackson’s legacy. We look forward to continuing in 2023! 

From left: Becka Johnson Poppe, Jenny Cooper, Sarah Reyneveld, Laura Baird, Keiko Budech, and Kristine Reeves with the Jackson bust in the Russell Senate Office Building

Group visits with Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA), center
Fellows on the Move

Marc Berger now serves as the executive vice president and Puget Sound market leader for the strategic communications firm, DH.

Michael Mage moved to the MultiCare Health System as an internal consultant for organizational effectiveness.

Alexis Mercedes has been promoted to director of sub-regional planning and equitable engagement at King County Regional Homelessness Authority.

Shin Yu Pai is now writer, editor and storyteller for King County Parks where she edits and writes park signage – a word nerd’s dream job. She is also guest public engagement curator for the Seattle Public Library where she produces public programs.

Alyssa Patrick just started a new position as the first communications and advocacy specialist at the Washington Association for Community Health.

Stephen Robinson recently became the director of community engagement at the Black Future Co-op Fund.

Meet our 2023 Henry M. Jackson Leadership Fellows!

We are excited to welcome our 2023 cohort to the Jackson Leadership Program. They are an impressive group representing a variety of sectors: nonprofit, local and regional governments, and business. Please take a moment and read about these amazing leaders.

Marc Berger, executive vice president and Puget Sound market leader for DH

Michael Mage, internal consultant for organizational effectiveness

Alexis Mercedes, director of sub-regional planning and equitable engagement at King County Regional Homelessness Authority

Shin Yu Pai, writer, editor and storyteller for King County Parks

Alyssa Patrick, first communications and advocacy specialist at the Washington Association for Community Health

Stephen Robinson, director of community engagement at the Black Future Co-op Fund

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Marc Berger

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Foundation Staff
Kathryn Terry, Executive Director
Maura Sullivan, Program Officer
Carol Vipperman, Senior Advisor
Gretchen Frankenstein, Office Manager

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