

Fueling the Fire:

North Cascades Institute's Path for Youth



Education + Relevancy + Stewardship → Workforce

by Mollie Behn

At a lakeside campsite in North Cascades National Park, Cassandra Barnedt carefully lays dry leaves and twigs in a fire ring. Building on top of this bed, she adds some larger, stronger branches. Small logs are thrown in so when the fire is lit, light will shine across the faces of the huddled teenagers surrounding her. She strikes a match and the flame emerges from the crevasses and moves its way around the branches, growing stronger and bigger until it finally envelopes the logs. Glowing, powerful, and beautiful, the fire Cassandra built reaches a crescendo in a burst of energy.

Kassandra has built many fires in her youth. Little did she know that the fire she built that July evening during her high school wilderness leadership course was symbolic of her future. Fire is a powerful force. It has the power to change a landscape and to bring forth new life. Regrowth and new life emerges from areas impacted by fire. It is exactly this power and growth North Cascades Institute (NCI) hopes to foster in today's young leaders. Like Cassandra, young people have the power to make positive changes in their community when given the

opportunity. Unfortunately, like many suppressed fires, many youth have not had the chance to grow into their full potential so they can face the challenges of the future...

It is no secret that today's youth are increasingly disconnected from nature. As a result, youth are less aware of issues and threats facing the environment and how to address them. We need to develop active and motivated citizens who are capable of implementing solutions to the challenges. These abilities derive from understanding

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the threats, consequences, and solutions to environmental problems, as well as feeling empowered to make necessary changes. The young people of today offer us a glimpse into a promising future, especially if we prepare them for the challenges and triumphs they will experience. Sadly, youth's disconnect from the natural world can leave them feeling less inclined to be actively engaged citizens and stewards. North Cascades Institute is confronting this situation through the Path for Youth initiative, a suite of programs and a shared vision with public lands agencies and community partners to engage elementary to graduate level students through education, conservation and stewardship.

North Cascades Institute seeks to inspire closer relationships with nature through direct experiences in the natural world. The Institute's mission is to conserve and restore Northwest environments through education. Since

student could return as a young adult to intern for a national park or local conservation non-profit. This continuum of experiences, or pathway, ensures students have follow-up, repeated connections that build on prior experiences, and ongoing opportunities to stay engaged.

The Spark that Lights the Fire

Imagine that initial igniting of the fire Cassandra carefully crafted. It is just getting started, bursting with potential energy. Like the growing fire, the Path for Youth starts at the foundational level by introducing students to the natural world and sparking awareness, fascination, and appreciation through education and hands-on experiences. The goal is to provide an introduction to nature, knowledge of the natural world and how humans are connected to it. It is the spark that lights the fire.



Mountain School, an award-winning residential environmental education program for 3rd-12th grade students, is one of these sparks. During 3 to 5-day programs at the Institute's Environmental Learning Center on Diablo Lake in North Cascades National Park, students participate in interdisciplinary hands-on lessons focusing on the ecosystems, geology and natural and cultural history of the mountains while connecting lessons learned to their home community. These lessons serve as stepping stones for students to think critically about how the natural world relates to them. During pre and post-trip classroom visits, students make additional connections between the lessons learned in the North Cascades and their everyday lives back home. Often Mountain School is the first time students have been away from home or have experienced the natural world up close.

1986, the Institute has helped connect people, nature and community through science, art, literature and the hands-on study of the natural and cultural history of the Pacific Northwest.

North Cascades Institute believes that first-hand experiences in nature provide young people with not only increased awareness and knowledge of the natural world, but also insights into themselves, increased confidence and a greater sense of belonging. We are invested in closing the gap in young people's capacity to address environmental threats by engaging them in transformative experiences aiming to create leaders ready to embrace the future.

The strength of the Path for Youth initiative lies in the creation of a continuum of intentional, interconnected experiences. For example, a student who participates in a 3-day ecosystem-studies program in 5th grade could return again in 11th grade for a course in wilderness stewardship and leadership development. With guidance and mentorship, that

Mountain School offers the opportunity for students to find hope and faith in their futures. Kristin Smith, from Bellingham, Washington, participated two years in a row during high school. She came away with the following realization for her experiences: "Without Mountain School I never would have seen many of life's possibilities. To live in such a place and show others the wild world, with days off spent wandering the soaring peaks and swift rivers; what more could one ask for? Not only are the people at the learning center working towards the preservation of our planet and our future; they are having fun doing it. That is what I would like from my life, to make a difference and to be happy. Perhaps without Mountain School I never would have realized how to do that, or even that it was possible. I realize anew that this is what I desire each time I visit the learning center; my passion for the world's untamed places and their preservation is renewed, and my faith in people is restored."

North Cascades Institute hopes that all students have the opportunity to see their world and their future in such

a positive light. The Path for Youth initiative provides opportunities for many youth who might not otherwise have the chance to participate. Some programs are offered tuition-free or on a sliding scale to accommodate financial challenges, while others engage underserved students from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds who have historically lacked access to these opportunities. Programs are designed to be inclusive and culturally competent.



For example, the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Program targets underserved urban youth ages 5 to 14 from Mount Vernon, Washington. Most of these youth are considered “at risk” and have never before visited a national forest or park. Youth in this program participate in community-based stewardship projects, visit local public lands, and learn about local natural history through events like the International Migratory Bird Festival.

Catching on Fire

Once students have been introduced to the North Cascades, we fuel their growing awareness with contextual knowledge and deeper immersion experiences. High school students from Washington and Oregon participate in North Cascades Wild and Cascades Climate Challenge, tuition-free programs which immerse students in canoeing, backpacking and outdoor living for up to three weeks. These experiences challenge students to think critically about their surroundings, the role of public lands and their relevance to their home communities. Each program teaches students self-efficacy and an ethic of stewardship: outdoor

skills, personal leadership, public speaking, communication and self-awareness. Students are mentally and physically challenged and overcome challenges that transform their perception of themselves and their relationship to others. Through these immersion experiences, students are given the tools and the inspiration to be stewards and active citizens, fueling the fire of awareness and empowerment.

Kassandra’s “fire” started during North Cascades Wild. North Cascades Wild is a leadership development and wilderness conservation program for underserved high school students. Most students are socioeconomically and ethnically diverse, including many recent immigrants. Students experience new adventures, realizations and discoveries each day as they spend 8 or 12 days participating in service learning projects.

Cascades Climate Challenge engages 10th and 11th grade students in climate science and leadership development with the goal of creating climate change leaders in communities throughout the Pacific Northwest. During a 20-day course in the North Cascades, students learn about the science of climate change from local experts. Back at home, students design and implement a service learning project in their home community to teach others about ways we can address climate change.

The power of the place, the community and the personal challenges make these immersion experiences a once in a lifetime opportunity. Kassandra recalls, “the thing that keeps everyone coming back were the relationships we formed



while out in the wilderness. Something about the wild brings everyone together. Barriers are broken down and people learn to work together despite their differences. After this amazing two week journey I was left craving more of the North Cascades." Armed with a supportive group of friends and mentors, students return home with new ideas, new identities, and new possibilities. The fire's warmth and energy continues to spread.

The Henry M. Jackson Youth Leadership Conference rekindles these relationships for sixty students who participated in North Cascades Wild, Cascades Climate Challenge or another public lands stewardship program in the Pacific Northwest. The tuition-free three-day conference takes place in November at the North Cascades Environmental Learning Center and provides additional tools for the students' continued engagement in stewardship and active citizenry. These young leaders attend workshops and small group activities focusing on personal development, job and internship placement, higher education opportunities, communication, leadership styles and community engagement. Students leave with a mentor and a large support network.

Igniting Other Energy Sources

The Henry M. Jackson Youth Leadership Conference, Cascades Climate Challenge and North Cascades Wild provide critical skills for young adults to be prepared for the workforce. Fueled by knowledge, skills, and a sense of self-efficacy, the fire lit inside the students builds strength, capacity and expands further to cover new areas and new possibilities. The Path for Youth envisions students transferring their experiences to the workforce. The fire is igniting other energy sources.

Alumni, age 18 years and older, of Path for Youth programs connect with leadership programs with regional conservation and service corps partner organizations. Other students earn entry-level jobs or internships with the National Park Service, US Forest Service, North Cascades Institute and other non-profit organizations. Using the skills gained through previous experiences, these employees also activate the ethics fostered from these experiences.

For example, North Cascades National Park's Youth Conservation Corp (YCC) hired Cassandra to collect seeds, learn about invasive species and revegetation, and conduct park maintenance. The following year, Cassandra returned as Crew Leader for the YCC. In this role, Cassandra sparked the interest of others in learning and fostering a stewardship ethic. Proven to be an important asset to the park, Cassandra became a student hire for the maintenance division and spent part of her summer working with North Cascades Wild students and gaining an understanding of government operations.

Individuals eager to take their interest in engaging people in the natural world to an even higher level after college can enroll in the Master of Education in Environmental Education program. North Cascades Institute partners with Western

Washington University's Huxley College of the Environment to offer a residential Master of Education in Environmental Education program. These graduate students participate in a yearlong professional residency at North Cascade Institute. Through the residency and integrated course work, the graduate students practice environmental education as teachers of the Path for Youth programs and learn about the operations of non-profit administrations. Graduates of this program become leaders in environmental education, non-profit administration and conservation.

The Value of a Path for Youth

Environmental education is traditionally centered on the idea of establishing student's ecological literacy, derived from sequential stages of awareness, knowledge and empowerment. However, students seldom have a chance to get past the awareness stage. Participating in one isolated program ignites the spark, but participation in two or more programs fuels the flame. A scaffolding of experiences allows for the student to capitalize on prior experiences, knowledge and skills, while presenting new challenges, new ideas, and skills. Each program a student participates in reaffirms the student's connection to the place, clarifies values and lessons learned, and enables them to go from being aware to knowledgeable to empowered. Multiple experiences enable students to build relationships with others who have had similar experiences which helps reinforce and support the awareness, knowledge and empowerment acquired. Through this scaffolding of experiences, the Path

for Youth builds leadership skills, imparting the knowledge and tools that enable the students to become community leaders and stewards, sparking the interest in others.

Kassandra is now an 18 years old freshman (with Junior standing) at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. Majoring in Environmental Studies and Education, she hopes to teach environmental education in a school setting. This fall she will participate in the Youth Leadership Conference not as a student, but as a leader, ready and capable to mentor and keep the fire burning inside students not much younger than she.

There are countless Kassandras out in the world. North Cascades Institute strives to keep building and feeding the fire of youthful energy. We must connect youth through initial experiences that spark their awareness, and then reconnect and reinforce original experiences through additional education programs and opportunities that keep the flame glowing and growing.

Mollie is part of the Path for Youth herself. As one of the Institute's Master of Education in Environmental Education students, Mollie taught Mountain School, lead North Cascades Wild trips and helped coordinate the 2nd Annual Youth Leadership Conference.

