



Newhalem



Students learn, network, and collaborate in the North Cascades

By Katie Griffith

The sun was sparkling on Diablo Lake as a yellow school bus arrived at the North Cascades Environmental Learning Center to drop off students from all over the Pacific Northwest. Students traveled from as far as Astoria, Ore., and as close as Concrete to attend the fifth annual Youth Leadership Conference Nov. 7-9.

The Youth Leadership Conference is modeled after a professional conference and is made possible through a partnership between North Cascades Institute, North Cascades National Park, and U.S. Forest Service. The conference gives students a chance to reconnect with the North Cascades, build leadership skills, and network with industry professionals to find internship and job opportunities as they consider the skills they need to achieve their goals.

"The Youth Leadership Conference has been an effective way to connect students to next-step opportunities while providing mentorship and support so they can stay engaged in conservation and the outdoors," said Program Manager Amy Brown. Organizations such as Washington Trails Association, Earthcorps, Skagit Valley College, National Outdoor Leadership School, and many others attended the conference to share opportunities with youth.

Though most of the students who attended this year's conference have participated in the Institute's Youth Leadership Adventures program, alumni from the Student Conservation Association, Seattle Parks and Recreation's Outdoor Opportunities program, and Interim Wild of Seattle's Community Development Association also were in attendance. After completing outdoor leadership programs during the summer, the students came prepared to communicate and collaborate with each other, jumping right into the experience with enthusiasm.

This year's conference was especially student-driven, with more youth in leadership roles than ever before. Former program alumni acted as small group leaders for current students, and four students led skill-building workshops.

One highlight that showcased student leadership was an "Open Space" discussion on Sunday. For two hours, students participated in discussions on topics of their choice, with little adult interference. The topics ranged from "Inclusion in the Community" and "Improving the School System" to "Effects of Declining Biodiversity" and "Minimum Wage." The topics were student-generated and student-led.

Students from Concrete High School were among those who shared their ideas during the Open Space discussion and learned new leadership skills throughout the weekend. Senior Muriel Troka and sophomore Brook Barned were participated in the Youth Leadership Adventures program with North Cascades Institute and returned to Diablo Lake to attend the conference.

"My experience at the YLC was super beneficial," said Troka. "Not only did I get to pick up some important contacts and have fun with lots of like-minded people, but I left the Learning Center with a much clearer idea of what I would like to do after high school and how to get there."

Concrete's Twin Cedars Alternative High School director Mary Janda was also able to attend the conference and is excited to share the resources she gained with her alternative students. She was impressed with the keynote speaker, National Park Service Youth and Special Initiatives Coordinator Vanessa Torres, who traveled from Washington D.C., to speak at the conference. Torres spoke with passion about her path in the National Park Service and inspired the youth attendees to achieve their own dreams. "National Parks are a treasure that must be shared with new generations or will be lost to future students and families," said Janda.

Any high school student between 14-18 can sign up for the institute's summer program, Youth Leadership Adventures, and receive an invitation to attend next year's Youth Leadership Conference in November 2015. During summer

courses, students spend eight or 16 days in the North Cascades. The trips include canoeing, backpacking, trail work, and scientific research.

"I encourage all Concrete students to look into applying for the Youth Leadership Adventures trips," said Barned. "You get to go out hiking, camping, backpacking, and canoeing for eight days with people your age and explore essentially your backyard!"

North Cascades Institute works hard to make trips available for any

motivated student. In 2014, 90 percent of participants received financial assistance.

For more information about signing up for Youth Leadership Adventures, the Youth Leadership Conference, or the North Cascades Institute in general, go to www.ncascades.org or call 360.854.2599.

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Submitted photos

