

# Building Stronger Roots:

Cultivating Collaboration in the Youth and Outdoors Space  
in Washington State



PREPARED BY

FISCAL SPONSOR



**LBC Action**  
EMPOWERING IMPACT



**PHILANTHROPY  
NORTHWEST**



## Introduction

In the spring of 2022, the Washington Outdoors Collaborative, an initiative led by LBC Action, conducted a discovery process assessing barriers and opportunities related to greater collaboration among the many organizations working to connect Washington State youth to the outdoors. The findings of that discovery process are detailed in this report.

## Background

### Barriers and Implications

Washington State is uniquely suited for youth outdoor engagement through abundant natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities, a strong network of outdoor schools, the practice of environmental education in schools, and an ethos of philanthropic and policy support for youth development. Currently, however, there is no official coordinating body for all of the hundreds of organizations and agencies that help Washington State youth develop lifelong connections to the outdoors.

One factor is the wide range of organizations that serve youth and their connection to the outdoors in Washington State. This includes nonprofits and agencies of all sizes engaging a diverse range of communities across three programming subsectors: outdoor recreation and engagement programs supported by the No Child Left Inside grant program (NCLI) led by Washington State Parks and the Recreation Conservation Office; residential outdoor schools; and school-based environmental/ climate education organizations. This report



*Photo Courtesy of Larry Workman*

explores whether these groups would achieve greater mission success and attract more funding if they were more organized, and whether a scarcity mindset might be driving competition that further impedes collaboration.

### Equity

This report also offers crucial insights from organizations that are led by and/or that serve underrepresented minorities. It is clear that equity must be central to any actions designed to foster greater collaboration. Yet, while nonprofits that are particularly focused on connecting traditionally marginalized youth to the outdoors may stand to benefit from greater support from legislators and foundations, those same groups tend to have smaller budgets, and therefore, less capacity to participate in collaborative efforts.



*Photo Courtesy of YMCA Bold Gold*

### Other Efforts

There are several examples of past and present collaborative efforts in Washington State, but they are limited in scope. E3 Washington (now an all-volunteer organization) was set up to organize environmental and sustainability education organizations. The No Child Left

Inside grant program awards grants to organizations that provide outdoor experiences to youth in Washington State, but the program is not a coordinating body. An Outdoor School Network exists, but just for outdoor schools.



## Methodology

### Participation (Interviews)

Beginning in February 2022, the Washington Outdoors Collaborative project team invited more than 50 stakeholders in youth outdoor engagement to participate in a discovery process. The individuals we reached out to included nonprofit leaders from outdoor schools, outdoor recreation and engagement programs funded by the No Child Left Inside grant program, and school-based environmental education programs; Republican and Democratic members of the Washington State Legislature; and representatives from private and corporate foundations.

Our outreach list spanned organizations that are BIPOC led and/or that serve traditionally marginalized youth, neighborhood-based organizations, and large nonprofits serving thousands of young people every year.

Between March and May 2022, the project team led by CJ Goulding and Tashia DeLaCruz-Arnold conducted discovery interviews with stakeholders. The majority of the interviews were with one representative from an organization. The exceptions were two focus-group interviews with representatives from organizations funded by the No Child Left Inside grant program. All interviews were framed as discussions, with space provided for questions from interviewees and for organic exploration of topics related to youth and the outdoors.

*For a full list of interview participants and their affiliations, please see Addendum A.*

### Questions

During the discovery process interviews, we used the following questions to guide our discussions. Because we designed the sessions to be two-way conversations, not every participant was asked every question. However, many relevant insights came out in the course of the interviews, even when those insights weren't direct answers to specific questions.

- How would you describe the outdoor youth sector or field and what do you think is missing?
- What is the goal of the work you're doing? What are you hoping to shift or change?
- What are some of the ways that you collaborate with others?
- What are the benefits of collaboration? And what are the barriers to more collaboration?
- Are there other collaborations that you've seen that are operating well or falling short?

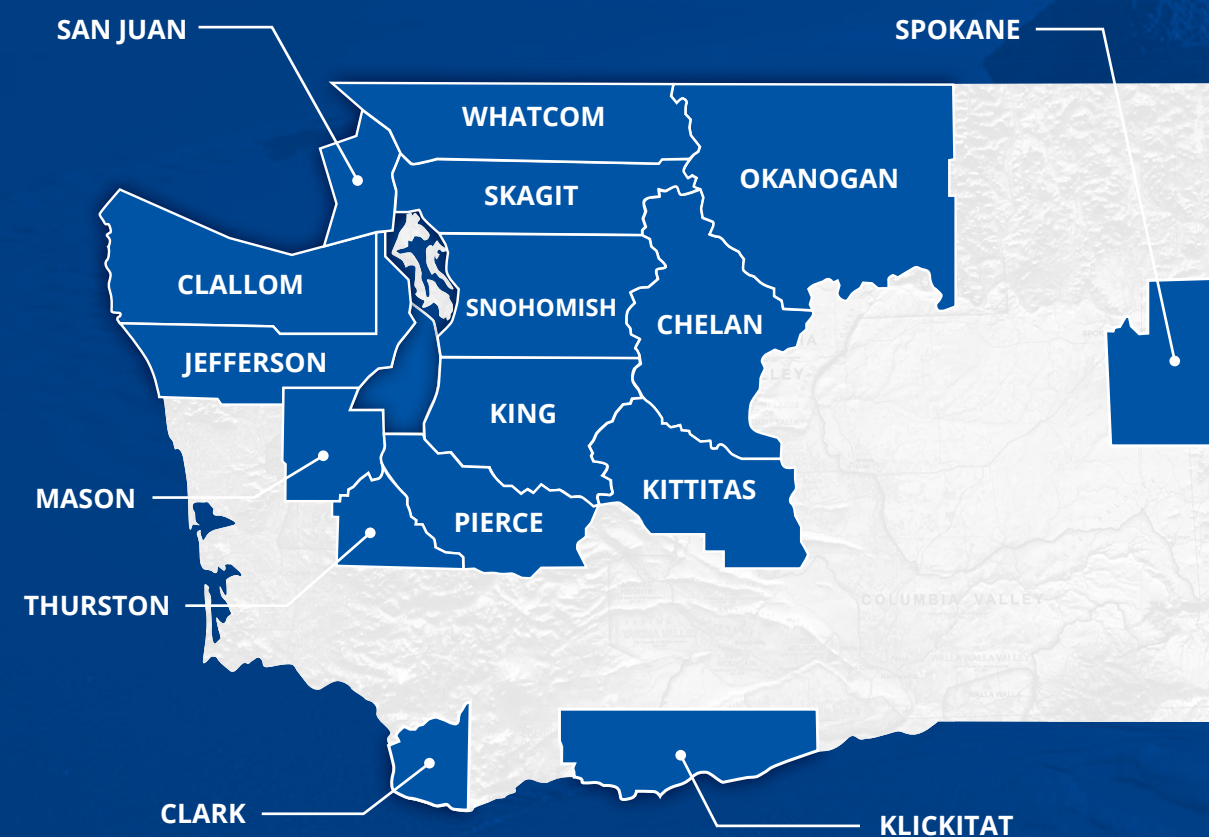
### Survey

To broaden the reach of our discovery process, we sent a brief survey to several hundred stakeholders. We received 69 responses to the survey, which asked recipients questions similar to questions asked during the interviews.

*Please see the survey questions in Addendum B.*

## GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY BY COUNTY

Survey respondents were geographically diverse, representing 16 of Washington State's counties.



*Photo Courtesy of Pierce County Parks and Recreation Services*

**Survey respondents represented a wide range of program sizes. Budgets ranged from \$100 to \$80 million each year, with a median annual budget of \$400K. The number of people served by organizations ranged from 35 to over 500,000 individuals, with a median of 1,400 individuals served annually.**

## Summary of Findings

### Motivations

Nonprofit leaders, policymakers, and funders who provide and support experiences that allow youth to explore the outdoors in Washington State represent a wide range of missions and interests. Environmental justice, conservation, scientific literacy, climate action, empowerment, and healing were just some of the many objectives cited by our interview participants and survey respondents. However, whether the mission focus was on the individual or on systems change, we found that the passion for youth and the outdoors is often rooted in personal experience, as children, parents, or both. This shared value transcends subsectors, geography, and culture – and speaks to the potential for greater collaboration.

### Barriers

Our discovery process revealed several key barriers to further collaboration among organizations working to connect youth to the outdoors in Washington State. First, collaboration requires significant investments of time and funding. Smaller nonprofits in particular often do not have the staff time or the discretionary budget required to play a meaningful role in a coalition. Likewise, funders and elected officials reported that time was a factor that limits their ability to facilitate coalition and alliance building. For program providers that are newer to the field, a lack of connection to potential partners and funders is also a barrier to collaboration. We also heard that a pervasive scarcity mindset in the sector compels organizations to compete for finite

funding, even when they would rather be looking for ways to cooperate.

**When asked to force rank reasons organizations might choose not to participate in coalitions, limited staff time was the number one reason given by survey respondents, followed by not being invited, not feeling a sense of belonging, and not seeing the value in collaboration.**

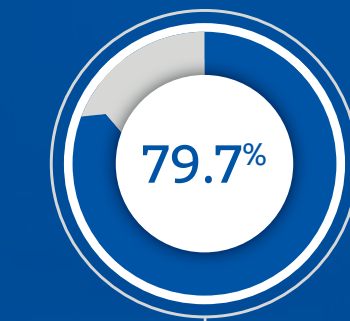
“If there are access barriers, you can’t be engaged. If there are engagement barriers, then you can’t learn. So we have to conceive of it as a spectrum from access to engagement to learning, and everything in between.”

– Jason Morris, Senior Program Officer,  
Pisces Foundation

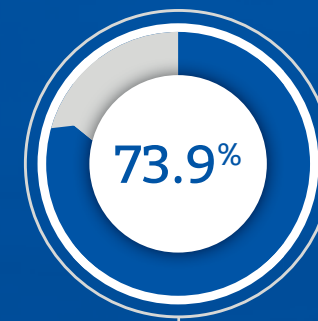
### Benefits

The benefits of collaboration are clear to nonprofits, funders, and policymakers alike. Working together allows nonprofits to develop and deliver more effective programming shaped by a broader spectrum of perspectives, values, and backgrounds. Collaboration opens the door to more funding opportunities. And it encourages intersectional initiatives that

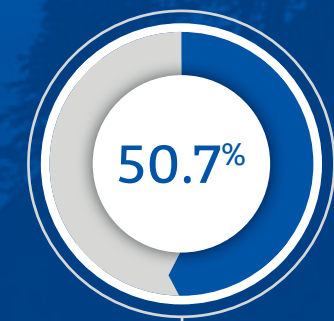
## IS YOUR ORGANIZATION STRONGLY AFFILIATED WITH ANY OF THE FOLLOWING AREAS OF WORK?



OUTDOOR RECREATION/ENGAGEMENT



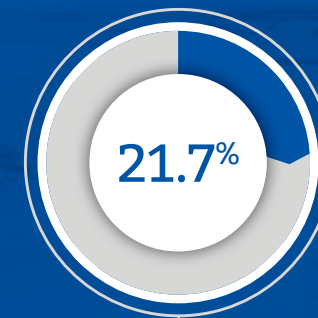
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION



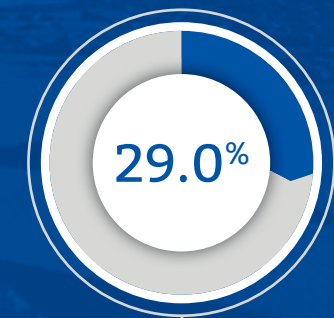
CONSERVATION AND CLIMATE EDUCATION



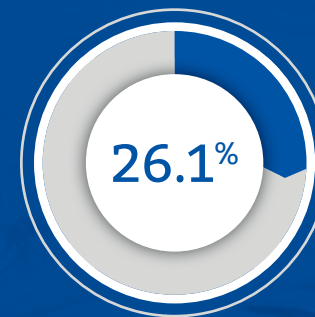
SERVING BIPOC YOUTH



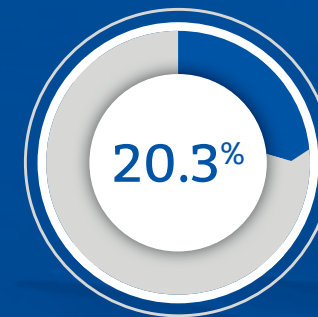
TRAIL MAINTENANCE



CREATION OF OUTDOOR-RELATED JOBS



CLIMATE AND/OR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE



OTHER

Among areas of work, outdoor recreation (79%) and environmental education (73%) were the most commonly selected.



align the youth and outdoors sector with efforts centered on education, health, and the environment. Foundation officers and policymakers stressed the benefits of nonprofits approaching them as a coalition. Specifically, when organizations make joint requests, the opportunity to support a broader constituency allows policymakers to make cumulatively larger grants and allocations, which grows the pie for the field.

**When asked to rank reasons for joining collaborations, the most common survey response was to create better programming. This is a departure from what we heard in interviews, where a desire for increased funding was a more commonly stated motivation. We speculate this is because the organizational representatives who filled out the survey may have more program-related roles than their counterparts who participated in the interviews.**

## Underrepresented Stakeholders

We heard consistently that current coalitions formed to connect youth to the outdoors in Washington State are overwhelmingly White-led, with predominantly White memberships, even when the missions of these collaborative efforts prioritize communities of color. BIPOC-led groups, tribes, rural organizations, and

smaller, volunteer-run nonprofits are often underrepresented or even missing from local and statewide coalitions. Whether this is because traditional power dynamics impede inclusion or because these groups tend to lack the capacity to participate in collaborations, the persistent inequities in coalition leadership are widely perceived as a barrier to growth for the entire field that must be at the center of any effort to encourage greater collaboration.

**“Organizations shouldn’t just be happy to have a seat at the table, they should be resourced and supported in bringing their voice.”**

- Stephanie Maez, Managing Director,  
Outdoor Foundation

## Best Practices and Imperatives for Collaboration

Successful collaborations share certain qualities. Funders and nonprofits emphasized the importance of having a clear and common purpose. Successful collaborations devote time to doing upfront work, including relationship building, before developing or delivering programming or approaching funders, and have capacity for administration for logistical planning, bookkeeping, and grant-writing. It is also important for collaborations to be led by community and to align with community goals, backed by trust-based philanthropy. Members of successful collaborations are able to prioritize collective goals, to lead and support at the same time. Finally, we recognize that the success of a collaboration devoted to connecting youth to the outdoors must adopt new power structures that share leadership with voices that are currently underrepresented in coalitions across the state.



**When asked to explain which shared values motivate collaboration, survey respondents most commonly cited equity, access, and environmental justice.**



## Conclusions

**“When it comes to the environmental movement, we have to change people’s circumstances so everyone could be active players in the game. That means looking at housing, food security, higher living wages, among other areas. All these issues are intersectional.”**

– Evlyn Andrade, Executive Director, EarthCorps

**1. Washington State has all the ingredients for greater collaboration among organizations focused on youth and the outdoors.** We have mountains, forests, lakes, and rivers for immersive wilderness experiences; geographically-diverse state and city parks that offer recreation closer to home; and hundreds of organizations dedicated to helping young people from all backgrounds explore these places. Washington State has a supportive philanthropic sector and policymakers who are eager to invest in programs that connect youth to the outdoors and strong Indigenous leadership representing tribes whose values, principles, and knowledge are essential to coalitions that aim to enjoy the land sustainably and equitably.

**2. Working together more effectively will require changes to attitudes and systems.** One of the primary barriers to collaboration is a scarcity mindset that leads to more competition than cooperation.

This in turn, fuels an urgency mentality that prioritizes immediate organizational needs over longer-term, rising-tide thinking. Embracing an abundance mindset, supported by foundations, corporations, and policymakers willing to invest in the upfront work essential to collaboration will enable organizations to seek out and form new partnerships that integrate the environment, health, education, criminal justice, and other factors that are crucial to community vitality. At the same time, true collaboration will also require significant disruptions to current power structures, including funders operating as co-equal members of their communities.

**“It’s hard to be generous of spirit when you’re all competing for the same grants. If we can eliminate the scarcity mentality, that would be a big step.”**

– Sen. Christine Rolfes (D),  
23rd Legislative District



Photo Courtesy of Larry Workman



**3. True systems change means ceding authority to BIPOC and Indigenous leaders.**

It is not enough for members of traditionally marginalized communities to be at the table or on staff. Coalitions – particularly those that aim to expand access to the outdoors for youth of color – must be led by people with lived experience that aligns with the experiences of the communities they are trying to serve – communities that are often farthest from the centers of power and privilege.

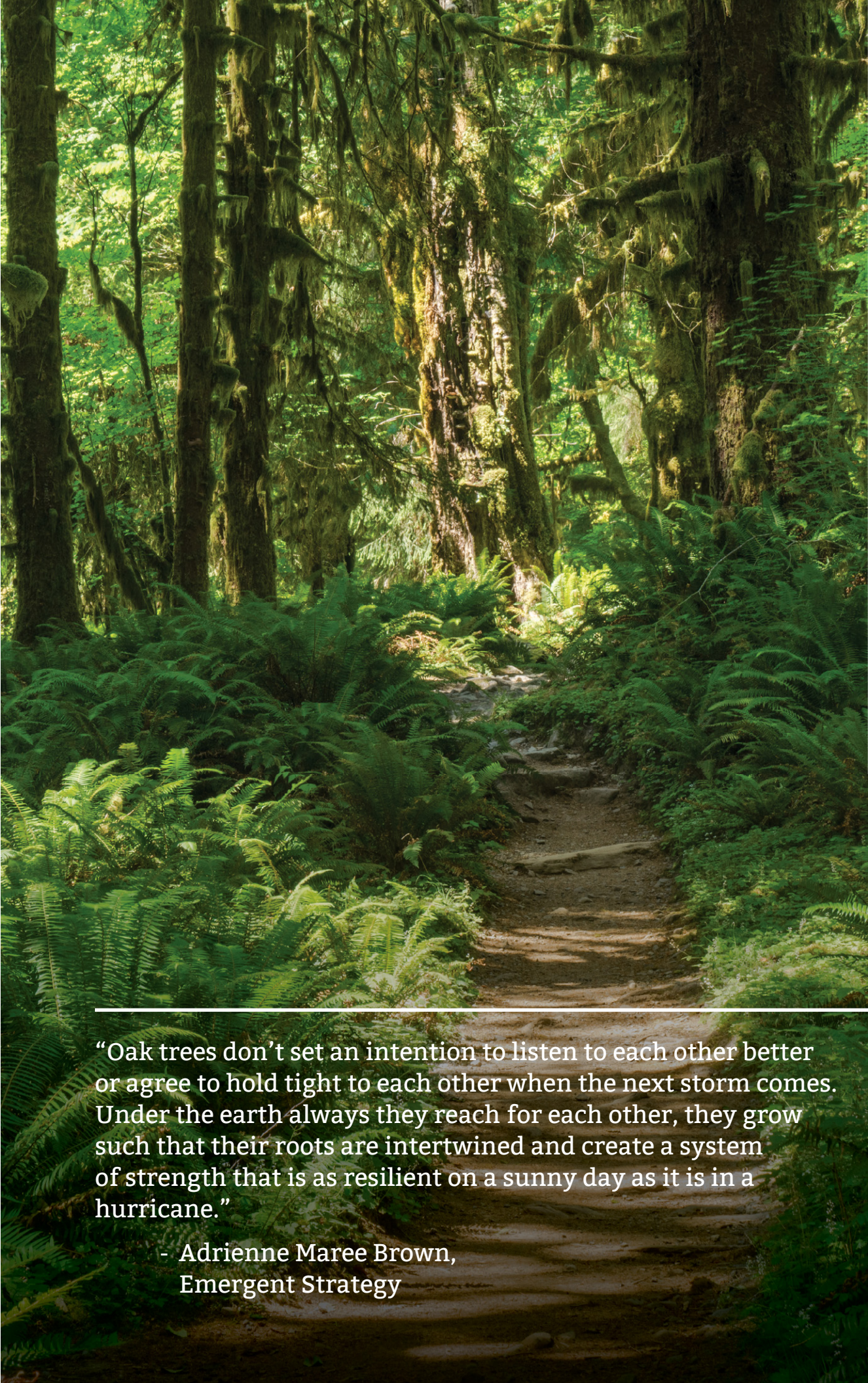
**4. Indigenous leadership, knowledge, and values are critical for collaboration.**

White-led coalitions wonder how best to leverage the outdoors to integrate education, recreation, environmental justice, conservation and other issues. Indigenous cultures, whose subsistence, tradition, and identity are all derived from the land, have been modeling a holistic approach to outdoor engagement since time immemorial. Coalitions that aim to help youth explore the outdoors should look to tribes in Washington State as teachers, as weavers, and as experts on respectful and culturally-relevant land use. This means taking the time to build relationships with tribes and following their leadership.

**5. Funders and policymakers we spoke to are ready to support BIPOC and Indigenous-led coalitions.**

Foundation officers, corporate giving managers, and elected officials suggested that a lack of coordination among organizations seeking funds is impeding impact at the mission level. These individuals expressed a wish for organizations to work together under Indigenous and BIPOC leadership more strategically and indicated that being approached by a coalition of groups and interests makes it easier for them to secure support for a funding request.

**92% of survey respondents indicated that collaboration is useful, but the collective grade of the current effectiveness of collaboration indicates a failing grade of 47 out of 100.**



“Oak trees don’t set an intention to listen to each other better or agree to hold tight to each other when the next storm comes. Under the earth always they reach for each other, they grow such that their roots are intertwined and create a system of strength that is as resilient on a sunny day as it is in a hurricane.”

- Adrienne Maree Brown,  
Emergent Strategy



## Shifting Power and Showing Up for Community

Our discovery process was designed in part to explore whether there was interest in a coordinating body that could streamline funding for organizations that we separated into three categories: outdoor schools, outdoor recreation programs, and school-based environmental education providers.

The findings of this process demonstrate that this construct is outdated and that the lack of coordination in this field is ultimately less about logistics and will likely not be best addressed with more bureaucracy. Rather, the entrenched predominance of White-led coalitions and a pervasive scarcity-mentality have contributed to a culture of non-collaboration.

The purpose of this report is not to prescribe solutions to these problems. We have heard clearly that those solutions must come from a community level, and be informed by the lived experiences of people within those communities. To that end, we offer a starting point: Fund a Black- and Indigenous-led group to define what collaboration around youth and the outdoors should look like going forward – and commit to funding outdoor work in Washington State that is shaped by BIPOC and Indigenous worldviews and traditions.

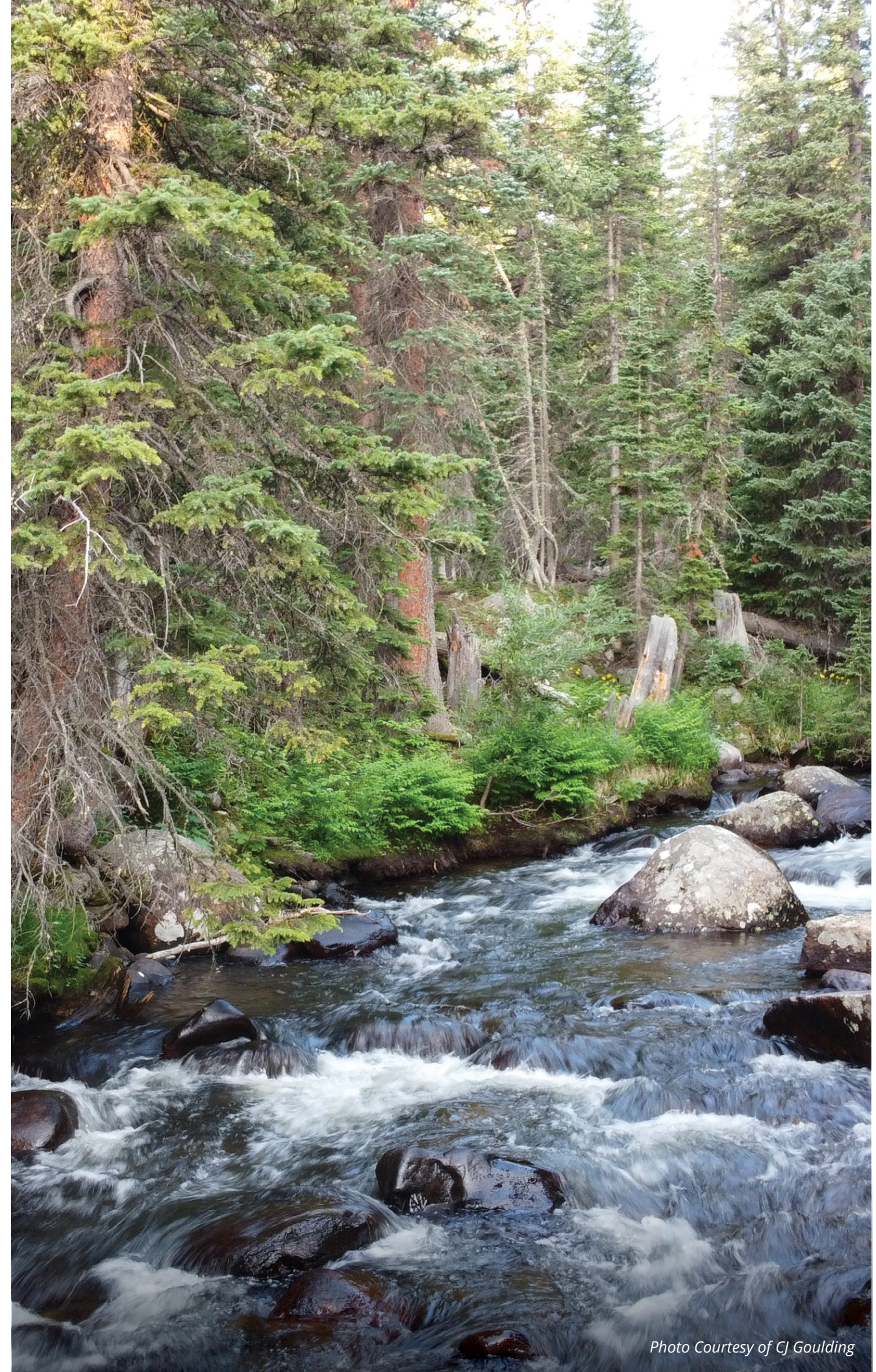
We acknowledge that this type of collaboration may already exist in BIPOC communities. Before prescribing any steps to build trust, shift power, and create equity, it is important to first listen, to understand what actions are in motion, and



*Photo Courtesy of YMCA BOLD AND GOLD*

to engage BIPOC and Indigenous individuals and organizations leading this work.

One action that could support this relationship building, and continue this growth towards collaboration, is a forum (inclusive of all stakeholders, but organized and driven by BIPOC and Indigenous leaders) where traditionally siloed groups can learn from each other, celebrate work that is already being done, and identify the shifts in thought and action required to enable greater collaboration and impact. We imagine a space for relationship-building, for thinking about the outdoors, education, and health holistically, and for charting a true process to change power structures.



*Photo Courtesy of CJ Goulding*





## Interview Participants

Courtney Aber, National Director, YMCA BOLD/GOLD	Rep. Debra Lekanoff (D), 40th Legislative District
Evlyn Andrade, Executive Director, EarthCorps	Elizabeth List, Philanthropic Advisor, The Seattle Foundation
Rep. Andrew Barkis (R), 2nd Legislative District	Jaime Loucky, Interim Chief Executive Officer, Washington Trails Association
Marc Berejka, President, REI Cooperative Action Fund	Stephanie Maez, Managing Director, Outdoor Foundation
Kitty Craig, Urban to Wild Director, The Wilderness Society	Ashley Miller, Senior Manager, Community Impact, EVO
Geoff Eseltine, Director of Outdoor Leadership, YMCA of Greater Seattle BOLD/GOLD	Jason Morris, Senior Program Officer, Pisces Foundation
Ed Ewing, Executive Director, Bike Works	Oak Rankin, Executive Director, Glacier Peak Institute
Sally Gillis, Managing Director, Strategy and Partnerships, The Seattle Foundation	Kristen Ragain, Managing Director, REI Cooperative Action Fund
Fabiola Greenawalt, Program Officer, The Russell Family Foundation	Betsy Robblee, Conservation and Advocacy Director, The Mountaineers
Lyn Hunter, Director, Regional Strategies and Networks, Philanthropy Northwest	Sen. Christine Rolfes (D), 23rd Legislative District
Andrea Imler, Advocacy Director, Washington Trails Association	Rep. Alicia Rule (D), 42nd Legislative District
Anupama Joshi, Executive Director, Blue Sky Funders Forum	Melinda Posner, Parks Planner, Washington State Parks
Megan Karch, Chief Executive Officer, IslandWood	Rep. Sharon Tomiko Santos (D), 37th Legislative District
James King, Interim Executive Director, Central District Community Preservation and Development Authority	Jon Snyder, Outdoor Recreation and Economic Development Policy Advisor to Governor Jay Inslee
Kathryn Kurtz, Executive Director, Pacific Education Institute	

## Team

**Tashia DeLaCruz-Arnold,**  
Youth Development Professional,  
Quinault Indian Nation

**CJ Goulding,**  
Facilitator and Organizer

**Thatcher Heldring**  
Spitball, Inc

**Ben Klasky**  
Seismic Philanthropy

**Martin LeBlanc,**  
Principal, LBC Action

Learn more about the project team  
behind this report on LBC Action’s  
website: [www.lbcaction.org/lbc-team/](http://www.lbcaction.org/lbc-team/)

## Survey Respondents

Battle Ground School District	Outdoor Youth Connections
Big City Mountaineers	Sail Sand Point
Bike Works	Salish Sea Sciences
Camp Fire Samish	San Juan Island Sailing Foundation
Camp Indianola	Spokane Conservation District
Camp Koinonia	StreamTeam
Camp Korey	The Mountaineers
Camp Nor’wester	The Nature Project
Canoe Island French Camp	The Wilderness Society
City of Lakewood	Vamos Outdoors Project
Columbia Springs	Vashon Wilderness Program
Common Threads	Washington Outdoor School Consortium
Community Boating Center	Washington State University Snohomish County 4-H
Confluence	Washington Trails Association
Courageous Connections	WaYa Outdoor Institute
CultureSeed	Wild Whatcom
Dishman Hills Conservancy Education	WSU Chelan/Douglas Extension 4H
Double K Retreat and Adventure Center	YMCA of Greater Seattle
E3 Washington	YMCA Outdoor Leadership
Feiro Marine Life Center	Youth Experiential Training Institute (Y.E.T.I.)
Friends of North Creek Forest	
Glacier Peak Institute	
Hands On Personal Empowerment	
Highline Public School- Waskowitz	
Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement Group	
Hood Canal School District	
Huston Camp & Conference Center	
Kiwanis Camp Wa-Ri-Ki	
KWIAHT	
Lopez Island Family Resource Center	
LOTT/WET Science Center	
Mason County 4-H Forestry	
Mountains to Sound Greenway	
Mount St. Helens Institute	
Muckleshoot Indian Tribe	
Nisqually River Foundation	
North Counties Family Services	
Northwest Maritime Center	
Northwest Outward Bound School	
Northwest Youth Corps	



## Survey Questions

**Is your organization strongly affiliated with any of the following areas of work? (Please check all that apply):**

- ☐ outdoor recreation/engagement
- ☐ environmental education
- ☐ conservation and climate education serving BIPOC youth
- ☐ trail maintenance
- ☐ creation of outdoor-related jobs
- ☐ climate and/or environmental justice
- ☐ Other

**What communities do you strive to serve?**

**In what zip code is your organization's headquarters located? (If you are a national organization, please share the most relevant zip code in Washington state).**

**Please indicate if you or your organization currently participates with any of the following collaboratives (Please check all that apply):**

- ☐ e3
- ☐ Nature Center Collaborative
- ☐ NCLI
- ☐ Environmental Professionals of Color (EPOC)
- ☐ Total

**Please name any other Washington-based outdoors/environmental collaboratives that you and/or your organization participate in**

**What are the most important reasons why your organization might choose to collaborate with other organizations? (Please rank them in order, with 1 = most important reason to collaborate).**

- ☐ Provide better programming
- ☐ Learn and share knowledge
- ☐ Create society-level impact
- ☐ Professional development
- ☐ Advocate for shifts in policy
- ☐ Raise more money

**Please provide a brief explanation as to why you chose your top response(s) to the previous question**

**What are the most important reasons why your organization might choose NOT to collaborate with other organizations?**

**(Please rank them in order, with 1 = most important reason why you might NOT collaborate):**

- ☐ We don't have enough staff time to do so
- ☐ We haven't been invited to join current collaboratives
- ☐ We don't feel we belong in current collaboratives
- ☐ We don't see great value in current collaboratives

**Please provide a brief explanation as to why you chose your top response(s) to the previous question**

**One reason that collaborative efforts tend to be successful is when partnering organizations share common values, goals, or purposes. Are there any specific values/goals/purposes that you have, which would motivate you to collaborate with others?**

**Would Washington state be more effective at conservation and/or connecting youth to the outdoors if we had stronger collaboration between nonprofits such as your organization?**

**On a scale from 1-100 (100 is perfect), how well do you believe organizations in your field are CURRENTLY collaborating in Washington state?**

**Please name any organizations that you feel ARE ALREADY effective at helping organizations such as yours collaborate with each other**

**Please name any organizations that you feel COULD POTENTIALLY BE effective at helping organizations such as yours collaborate with each other**

**What is the total number of individuals that your organization serves annually?**

**What is the approximate total annual budget of your organization?**

**Would you consider your organization to be BIPOC-led?**