

Conservation Fieldwork Experiences at New Jersey Youth Corps of Phillipsburg

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on behalf of
New Jersey Audubon

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SECTION 1: STUDY OVERVIEW

Can programs whose primary purpose is to protect and conserve vulnerable natural environments provide secondary benefits in the form of environmental education opportunities and training for “green jobs”? Believing that the answer to this question is “yes”, New Jersey Audubon (NJ A) has for several years partnered with New Jersey Youth Corps of Phillipsburg (NJYCP or “Youth Corps”), a “second-chance” program for young adults in northwestern New Jersey, to include Corps members in riparian restoration projects managed by NJ A as part of its core conservation agenda. Beginning in 2017, NJ A has worked with Dr. Ethan Schoolman (Rutgers University) to evaluate the impact of the NJ A-NJYCP partnership on the lives and educational and career outcomes of Corps members. This report presents the findings of the research conducted by Dr. Schoolman on behalf of NJ A.

In brief, the findings of this research are as follows:

1. The participation of Corps members in conservation fieldwork with NJ A appears not to have caused current Corps members to incorporate environmental goals or concerns into their future academic or professional plans.
2. But working alongside NJ A did result in two distinct kinds of benefits for many Corps members. First, some Corps members displayed a newfound understanding of specific ecological concepts, and of the role that regular people can play in keeping wild places healthy and beautiful. Second, conservation fieldwork led many Corps members to develop a sense of their own potential for “making a difference” as ecological citizens.

While the primary purpose of this research was to enable NJ A to evaluate the impact of its partnership with NJYCP, it is also important to note that these findings represent a significant contribution to the scholarly literature on environmental education and job training. According to a recent study in the peer-reviewed journal, *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*: “Green-collar job training programs are often celebrated as an opportunity to lift low-income individuals and their families out of poverty, yet there is little research on the social and psychological experiences of training program participants after their transition to employment” (Falxa-Raymond et al., 2013; see also: Apollo Alliance and Green for All, 2008; Pinderhughes, 2007). Environmental education in primary and secondary school settings, and the relationship between outdoor recreation opportunities and environmental values, has also been extensively researched and reported on (e.g. Clayton and Opotow, 2003; Hunter et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2001; Woodworth et al., 2011). But little work has examined how occupational training for conservation fieldwork can have secondary impacts, not just on green jobs skills and knowledge, but on environmental values more broadly. The present report begins to fill this gap, while also providing valuable insight to NJ A, its supporters, and its partners, about the broader social impact of its conservation programs.

The Partnership Between NJ A and NJYCP

New Jersey Youth Corps of Phillipsburg is a year-round program, administered by the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, that helps young adults ages 16-25 to earn their high school diploma or its equivalent while developing employment skills through meaningful community service projects. Established in 1998 and administered by the New Jersey

Department of Labor and Workforce Development, NJYCP has historically seen itself as “like the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s—but with a modern twist,” according to NJYCP Director Mike Muckle. As with other Youth Corps chapters in New Jersey, students at NJYCP are enrolled in the program for 4 months, much of which is spent in a traditional classroom setting at NJYCP headquarters in downtown Phillipsburg. As a compulsory component of the Youth Corps Program model, NJYCP arranges for Corps members to participate in a minimum of 140 hours of Service Learning Projects that provide controlled, supervised work situations that allow Corps members to develop the maturity and skills necessary to be a good employee.

At least one thing sets NJYCP apart from other Youth Corps chapters in New Jersey, however: it is part of the culture and history of NJYCP for both the in-class curriculum and the Service Learning Projects to have an environmental focus. According to Muckle: “Seeking out meaningful, environmentally themed projects for Corps members to work on was a primary goal early on, and NJYCP quickly found a partner in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Field Office performing streamside restoration projects.” Working with USFWS gave NJYCP exposure to other environmental organizations in northern New Jersey, and over the past twenty years NJYCP has often been asked to volunteer students for regional riparian plantings.

NJYCP has provided labor for riparian restoration projects with New Jersey Audubon since 2015. From the start, NJYCP’s participation in NJA conservation efforts has provided benefits that go beyond simply protecting a precious natural resource. According to NJA Stewardship Project Director John Parke, “the students’ enthusiasm, professionalism, work ethic and passion for helping to restore and protect natural resources, was an inspiration that helped motivate all that were on site for the work. To see the pride on their faces after the job was complete, knowing that they helped improve the ecosystem with the hard work they performed, was something that makes them an invaluable resource for conservation for the region.”

Based on the success of early collaborations, NJA approached NJYCP about partnering on a grant application to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) for funding associated with the Delaware River Restoration Fund. Funding was awarded in 2016. Since that time NJA has contracted NJYCP to perform riparian restoration work and stewardship activities on project sites in three sub-watersheds, as identified by the Delaware River Watershed Initiative (DRWI). In tandem with NJYCP’s permanent staff, NJA has provided on-site training to Corps members on the specifics of each project. NJA has also supplied the materials necessary to perform the work at no cost to the landowner or producer.

With respect to NJA’s core conservation mission, NJYCP’s participation in stewardship projects, funded by NFWF, has been an unqualified success. Corps members’ work on project sites has focused on improving water quality and wildlife habitat through the removal of invasive species such as Multiflora Rose, Autumn Olive and Japanese barberry, and the planting of native trees and shrubs such as American sycamore, Buttonbush and Black Willow. Corps members have also provided “follow-up maintenance stewardship practices” at several sites to ensure the continued functionality of earlier restoration projects. From September 2016 to September 2018, NJYCP has provided 50 Corps members, performing 1,760 hours of service toward the partnership with NJA.

Beyond the immediate rewards of restoration projects successfully completed, NJA views its collaborations with NJYCP as a key step in achieving the larger goals of the overall DRWI. There is every indication that NJYCP will continue to pursue Service Learning Projects with NJA after the funding period has concluded, thus providing a sustainable source of capable, on-call labor, managed by permanent staff with ever-increasing experience in the scientific basis and techniques of conservation fieldwork. Engaging another partner in the Delaware River Watershed (Watershed), in particular one active in the realm of education and skills training, expands regional capacity for achieving sustainability goals and embodies what community outreach means for the DRWI. With Corps members as eager participants in watershed restoration, NJA can leverage its expanded workforce to speed the implementation of agricultural and forest Best Management Practices (BMPs) in the Highlands Cluster region. In particular, the Corps' growing reputation as skilled contributors to watershed restoration is already enhancing NJA's ability to engage landowners and enroll them in federal and state cost-share conservation programs.

For NJYCP, working with NJA constitutes a perfect fit with its primary mission. Participating in hands-on conservation fieldwork has exposed Corps members to the kind of "green jobs" that might be available to them in today's economy. More generally, the mentally and physically demanding nature of the work has given young adults in need of a "second chance" the opportunity to develop skills and a mindset that enhance their employability no matter what their future career. In addition, working as a sub-contractor for NJA has provided much needed funding to support other NJYCP training programs, all while developing relationships with other Cluster partners and the general public through NJA's involvement with the DRWI.

From the point of view of NJA and NJYCP, their partnership has clearly accomplished its primary goals: helping to conserve and restore riparian areas, while enabling Corps members to further their education and provide a valuable community service. But beyond these first-order and crucial outcomes, what is likely to be the long-term impact of participating in conservation fieldwork with NJA on Corps members' environmental views and life choices? It was this question that motivated NJA to engage Dr. Schoolman, an assistant professor in the Department of Human Ecology at Rutgers University, to provide an evaluation of how participation in conservation fieldwork may be impacting Corps members. Specifically, it was envisioned that Dr. Schoolman would conduct research aimed at answering two questions:

1. What role, if any, has the participation of Youth Corps students in conservation fieldwork played in their ability to achieve the educational and career-development goals set forth by the Youth Corps program?
2. Does being involved with conservation programs influence more generally the way that Corps members think about environmental issues and/or their own potential for helping to address environmental problems through either future career or lifestyle choices?

The rest of this report describes the findings from this research.

Research Design

Research conducted for this report was aimed at learning how Corps members' participation in conservation fieldwork with NJA may have shaped their perceptions of environmental issues and

orientation towards environmental values, as well as their interest in “green jobs” as a potential career path.

Each year NJYCP enrolls three cohorts of 10-20 young adults; cohorts remain with NJYCP for a period of four months (the four-month periods are July-October, November-February, and March-June). As described above, once or twice during the four-month period for a given cohort, Corps members participate in 2-3 days of conservation fieldwork for which they are trained and supervised by staff at NJA. In-class preparation for conservation activities includes classroom lessons on watershed ecology and becoming qualified for jobs in the “green economy.” Actual conservation activities with NJA include planting new native trees, shrubs and other vegetation in riparian areas, and stabilizing streambanks with native live stakes, vegetation plugs and vegetation whips.

For this report, Dr. Schoolman conducted in-depth interviews with Corps members at the end of their cohort period; thus, all Corps members from whom data were collected were projected to become “graduates” from the NJYCP program. Corps members from three separate cohorts were interviewed from mid-2017 to mid-2018. As approved by the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers, Dr. Schoolman was permitted to interview only Corps members 18 years of age and older. All interviewees completed an “informed consent” process prior to their interview.

The primary research instrument for this study was an interview guide consisting of questions about Corps members’ environmental views, the ways in which everyday life practices reflect or do not reflect these views, obstacles to translating environmental views into concrete life practices, and thoughts on future academic and career plans. In gathering data for this research, Dr. Schoolman pursued the strategy of letting Corps members describe, in their own words, their experiences with conservation fieldwork, and the complex relationship between one’s environmental views, life practices, social and material environment, and thinking about what the future might hold.

All Corps members still enrolled in the NJYCP program at the end of their cohort period were invited to sit for an interview; actual participation was largely determined by which students were available on the days when Dr. Schoolman was also available to conduct research. It was emphasized that sitting for an interview was entirely voluntary, and Corps members were not in any way required or expected to participate in the research if they did not wish to do so. In total, 11 Corps members participated in research for this report: four from the summer-fall cohort, four from the winter cohort, and three from the spring-summer cohort. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, and took place at the NJYCP building in Phillipsburg. Interviews were conducted in a private office made available to Dr. Schoolman, and Corps members were encouraged by Dr. Schoolman and NJYCP staff to provide honest and unvarnished accounts of their experiences as part of their participation in this research. Corps members were further assured that all data collected for this project would remain anonymous and in Dr. Schoolman’s possession; neither NJA or NJYCP would have access to it. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Due to the fact that Corps members were generally quite receptive to being interviewed, it is believed that research findings accurately represent the experiences of Corps members who complete the NJYCP program. However, findings do not necessarily also represent the

experience of Corps members who left the NJYCP program before their cohort period was completed.

SECTION 2: FINDINGS

Two main findings emerged from this research. The first is that participating in conservation fieldwork with NJA cannot be said to have made, as an inspiration for pursuing future studies of environmental issues or for incorporating environmental goals into future career plans, a strong impression on any of the Corps members interviewed. No Corps member from whom data was gathered for this cited any classroom experience at NJYCP, much less the several days of working along streamsides with NJA, as having caused them to consider working in the “green economy” as a potential path moving forward.

The second main finding of this research, however, shows the value of considering any potential impacts of the NJA-NJYCP partnership in the context of where Corps members are starting from, in terms of their environmental knowledge and, critically, overall life experiences. Every Corps member interviewed for this study, in the course of a conversation ostensibly about the meaning of nature, environmental views, and future plans, of their own accord spent considerable time discussing past experiences of significant trauma. Several Corps members had spent part or all of their adolescence in foster care after being separated from their parents. Many spoke of repeated struggles with drugs, alcohol, gangs, crime, and cognitive and physical disabilities. At least two had been homeless for significant periods of time. Several spoke of being responsible for taking care of parents, younger family members, or, in some cases, their own children. For each Corps member interviewed, not completing high school felt less like an unexpected calamity, than the inevitable result of a long series of interlocking traumas that built on one another, eventually making it impossible to succeed at the expected pace in a conventional educational setting. For these young adults, simply enrolling with NJYCP represented a significant accomplishment. Indeed, several Corps members, being interviewed on the cusp of their graduation from the program, had not been able to complete NJYCP on their first try. Renewed private struggles or sudden family obligations might have prevented them from finishing the program once or even twice before.

Given the tumultuous and frequently traumatic lives that many Corps members had led, both outside and inside educational settings, formal knowledge about environmental issues, processes, or problems, came across in interviews as extremely limited. It is only with this starting point in mind that the actual impacts of participating in conservation fieldwork with NJA can be appreciated. Specifically, despite the apparent absence of links between conservation fieldwork and dramatic changes in anticipated life trajectories, *two kinds of distinct positive impacts* on Corps members from the NJA-NJYCP partnership emerged from this research.

First, Corps members described conservation fieldwork with NJA as a learning experience with implications for both knowledge about specific terms and concepts, and for a general sense of how nature works. With respect to knowledge about specific terms, several Corps members held up the idea that some plants could be considered “invasive,” as opposed to native, as something that had impressed them with its importance. Indeed, the idea that natural environments in the

neighborhood of bodies of water might be better off without some of the plants often found there was something that many Corps members remarked on as something they had never considered, and would not have occurred to them otherwise.

Interviewer: So, another big picture question. Has doing things with the Youth Corps, either in the classroom or with the outdoor projects, has that made you think about the outdoors or nature in a different way?

Eduardo: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Definitely. I didn't really, like, I knew what's not supposed to be there and what's supposed to be there, but then it definitely opened my eyes about, you know, it just brought me in another level of my area, my surroundings.

Interviewer: What are some examples of...?

Eduardo: Alright, so before I started Youth Corps, I didn't know anything about invasive species that were plants. I thought plants, every plant that was in nature or the woods or forest, whatever, were good. I didn't think there was a problem Now, I know what's bad in that environment and what I had to do in order to keep it, to have a good environment so I didn't know what those two were.

Interviewer: That's really interesting.

Eduardo: I just thought everything was just the same.

Interviewer: That's really cool. And that's mostly through the, that's something you talked about in the classes, or is it mostly sort of on, like on the ground learning?

Eduardo: On the ground learning. On the ground learning.

A second Corps member had learned about the concept of an invasive species as something abstract in a previous class. But he had never applied it to his part of New Jersey until enrolling in NJYCP and working with NJA.

Interviewer: Did you ever have any, um, like classes like in public school that helped you to learn more about like environmental things?

Maurice: Um, I took, I actually worked with the um, uh what do they call it? The FFA, [Future Farmers of America], I actually worked with them through the Philipsburg High School, and they had horticulture classes. I took that. I took wildlife and habitat, and we actually did a lot of different things. I took environmental sciences and everything.

Interviewer: Oh, well what was that like for you?

Maurice: I actually loved it. That was another point that actually got me away for everything. I was always, and it was usually always my last class of the day, depending on the schedule rotation.

Later, Maurice was asked to reflect on how his time with NJYCP compared with what classes had been like with FFA.

Interviewer: So being in Youth Corps, have those classes been helpful in thinking more about environmental things, and kind of that, the sort of stuff that you encountered at FFA, or horticulture, environmental sciences back in high school?

Maurice: Um, it kind of just reinforced what I learned from the environmental classes in the FFA. I mean, I knew some of the stuff that we've been doing. I knew about invasive, um, yeah, invasive species. [laughs]

Interviewer: Right.

Maurice: Tongue twister.

Interviewer: Right.

Maurice: I know about invasive species, I learned that in horticulture classes. But it also taught me some things that I didn't know. And it never hurts to learn more.

Interviewer: So I'm interested, what kinds of new things have you learned about, like environmental subjects here, and then whether the class has been different in some way?

Maurice: Yeah, that's basically just, basically [laughs], I never thought that the thorn bushes that we were cutting down that one day [at an NJA project site] were an invasive species...

Interviewer: Right.

Maurice: I was like; oh, so all this time they just been poking me every time I walk through the woods and I thought they were wild, that, and able to be here. I thought they were supposed to be here...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maurice: I didn't know they were invasive. Yeah. I remember like I was out there on the first day at the um... because there's so much of it, there's so much of it, it's just like, wow. It just spread like wildfire. [laughs] Like wildfire. It's crazy ... I'd like to see my environmental sciences teacher because I'd be like: hey, did you know them, all these thorn rows aren't even supposed to be here? [laughs] I'm gonna be like, how come you didn't tell me that?!

Removing invasive species, and educating people about the serious problems posed by invasive plants to riparian wildlife habitats, is one of NJA's central goals in the Highlands Cluster region. Comments by Corps members like Eduardo and Maurice, as well as others interviewed for this report, strongly suggest that NJA and NJYCP are communicating about invasive species in ways that Corps members find accessible and memorable. Corps members are grasping the general concept of what an "invasive species" is, and they are also learning to recognize, in a rough way, particular invasive species in the wild.

When Corps members talked about what they had learned from getting their hands dirty with NJA, however, it was not only invasive species that they talked about. In fact, it was just as common for Corps members to frame the educational benefits of their time with NJA in very general, even elementary terms. The idea that regular people, in their everyday lives, had the power to make wild environments healthier and more beautiful, was itself something that struck some Corps members as a surprise—even a shock. Similarly, the possibility that regular people, without higher education or extensive special training, could become knowledgeable about environmental processes, came as a revelation to young adults whose experiences in conventional classroom settings had often been compromised by significant personal struggles. Kevon, for instance, had received a felony conviction for gang-related activity at age 13, and persistent difficulty staying out of trouble with the police was one of the things that had made it impossible for him to graduate high school. But recently, he had moved to Phillipsburg and started at NJYCP.

Kevon: So I came here, and everything is pretty—like everything in Phillipsburg is pretty nice and clean. I didn't get too deep into like the nature type of stuff like you know. Like now you bring it up, you know like I had experiences with it, but when I got deep into it is when I came to the [NJYCP] building. When I came here it was, they tell, we were always out [on Service Learning Projects, including with NJA], so you get to learn a lot, you know. Like uh, Mike [Muckle], he tells you a lot about different things, like I've learned a lot about acorns, like lots.

Interviewer: Like what, what are some things that he...?

Kevon: Yeah, the different types of them, the names of them, like things I never knew before. When we went to go pick the thorns you know, we learned the different names, the Japanese, uh, the Japanese um...

Interviewer: I know what you're talking about.

Kevon: Thing yeah, you break it, you could see the color like just to see it. And then we put it all in like a pile so like animals could go and they'd actually live in there, which I never knew that which is crazy. So we made the environment look nice, we helped out the animals from there; like when you're here you learn a lot. Like they teach you a lot. They know a lot about gardening, and we planted stakes [with NJA] and they know a lot about how to like, I never thought I knew that type of stuff. Out here you just learn more. So, it's pretty cool. Like, like when I was in the high school it was, it's not like, it's good. You know you learn, of course it's school, they want you to learn, but it's not like when you come here, you're learning like life. You're learning more about everything, you know.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Kevon: And when you're here these are the types of stuff that sticks in your head. It's not like you're just sitting in the classroom and you're watching. But I can sit in the classroom and I could watch nature and you can answer questions about it, but I'm not going to remember it. When I'm here your outside, you know you're talking and you're interested and the stuff is right in front of you and you begin to see different things and you want to know, you want to ask questions. They teach you, you're interacting, you're planting trees which the trees were big, they're not seeds you know. They put it in and we're shoveling it and raking it and make it look nice. And it's pretty cool. It's nice, they teach you a lot here.

Kevon's description of what he has learned about environmental conservation from NJYCP and NJA is not full of detail. But for someone who grew up in a major urban area, became involved with serious crime at a young age, and could recall no previous education about ecology or environmental science, Kevon's vivid sense of planting the right kind of trees is itself a significant achievement. Similar sentiments seemed to shine through from the words of Carolina—a Corps member who was born in Honduras, and emigrated to New Jersey with her family as refugees from violence in her native country.

Carolina: I wasn't born here. I found out about Youth Corp. through friends ... And see, I was going through a lot in school like, a lot of people like hating, like trying to fight me and like, and bullying and all this stuff. I just decided I didn't want to go to school anymore. So yeah, I found out about this program and I looked into it and I really liked it. Like I really liked it, so I just decided to stay here. And they helped me a lot like, I learned more here than I learned in school because I was always worried about people bullying me and stuff. So like I learned a lot in here. I learned a lot, like educate... like educational and working—so like, in a work site, because I never really worked, you know, out in the woods and stuff.

Interviewer: So what about the work site stuff, can you tell me about some of the work sites that you've enjoyed the most and sort of what you feel like you learned?

Carolina: Well, I really like when we went to the... I don't know what it's called, but we went to the woods to help like take these thorns out, these plants and stuff [invasive removal with NJA].

Interviewer: Right.

Carolina: And I really liked it because I never really, I didn't know about that, like I actually would learn something new that you actually have to take them out so the trees and everything grow. I didn't know that ... Like about the woods, like I thought it was just like whatever, you know, like they're supposed to be dead and all this stuff...

Interviewer: Right. [laughs]

Carolina: But then like when I came here like I actually learned that you have to take care of it too or, like nature, so everything grows in the way it's supposed to grow. And for oxygen, you know, and stuff.

Interviewer: Yeah. What did you mean though; you thought the woods were supposed to be dead?

Carolina: ... Well when we went over there and then we helped them move the thorns and stuff. When we went there everything was just so dead, and like now, well, Mike posted pictures on Facebook. And they look, it looks way better, it looks so clean, and it looks like everything's growing back. Like it looks nice. Compared to what it was before we got there.

In this part of her interview, Carolina is referencing the NJYCP practice of following up on NJA conservation projects with photographs of riparian areas recovering once invasive plant species have been removed. With no prior experience with environmental science, she can clearly see the connection between her own efforts and improvements to the natural environment. The terms that Carolina uses to describe the changes to this area—once “dead,” and now “way better,” “growing back” and “so clean”—are impressionistic, and drawn from everyday language. But it can also be argued that being able to boil the concept of watershed restoration down to the difference between life and death may well help Carolina to hold on to this important idea for the rest of her own life.

A final example of the relationship between NJA fieldwork and in-class learning at NJYCP shows that working on watershed restoration can be meaningful even for Corps members who have come close to graduating high school, but did not quite make it. In the case of Eduardo, what made NJA fieldwork especially useful was that it led to encounters with nature at its most concrete and stimulating.

Interviewer: So before Youth Corps, the schooling you've had in middle school and high school science classes, has there been connections you've made between like your science classes, for instance or, and these interests you have in animals? Or has that not been connected so much?

Eduardo: Not really, because as far as I can remember my science classes experiences were about cells and like plants. It wasn't really nothing about the animal behavior, the instincts or the features of it. It was just more of what's inside of it, basically the organs and the cells and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Has that been different with Youth Corps, where you feel it's been more relevant to your interests, or has it also been so where you kept these two things a little bit separate?

Eduardo: It's more relevant. Definitely. Because as we were working, I see animals that I haven't saw before. Like we were doing invasive species [with NJA] one time and I saw frogs like...

Interviewer: Right.

Eduardo: Yeah, like just right next to my foot, I couldn't believe it, so. And then Mike [Muckle] was talking to me about them. It seems like Mike knows a lot of stuff about the

wildlife and stuff, and so we have conversations about that, too. Plant life and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Have you ever seen frogs in the wild before?

Eduardo: Never. Yeah that was my first frog I ever saw, I was so close to it.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Eduardo: It scared me at first because it came out of the bushes and I was kind of jumpy. But then I started looking at it, and it was like looking at me, and it was like, oh wow, yeah. The pattern on it was so bright. It was amazing.

Earlier in his interview, in addition to relating how fieldwork with NJA how introduced him to the concept of invasive species, Eduardo talked about his love of animals—especially his own pet snake, and a fish tank in his grandparents’ house. But until tearing out thornbushes streamside with NJA, he had never seen the “amazing” colors of a frog in its natural habitat.

The second distinct way in which Corps members were impacted by participating in conservation fieldwork with NJA has to do not with knowledge, but with agency. Many Corps members interviewed this report conveyed the clear impression that pulling thornbushes and planting tree-stakes gave them a feeling of doing good for the environment that they had never had before. Indeed, not one Corps member who contributed time to this research—and it is important to recall that the only Corps members who took part were those who appeared likely to actually graduate from the program—recalled ever participating in any kind of volunteer conservation project or clean-up, prior to enrolling at NJYCP. For these young adults, the idea that they could “make a difference” as environmental citizens dawned as something of a revelation.

Interviewer: What do you remember most about the outdoor projects—the conservation projects and working outdoors?

Lindsey: With the outdoors, I mean I’m not, I hate being sweaty!

Interviewer: Okay. [laughs]

Lindsey: I sweat like my brothers, but let me tell you what, when you’re out there you just feel like, I don’t know, it may just be me, you know, you hear different things from different people, but I just feel like I’m making the world better. I feel like I joined this, this program, and we’re making everything better.

Interviewer: So what are some of the examples that most come to your mind, in terms of like working out there and making the world better. What really, what comes to mind?

Lindsey: ... Like when we’re out working with, like I know we worked with a guy, I think his name was John or something.

Interviewer: Oh, John Parke?

Lindsey: Yes, John Parke we worked with him. And I just like, I don’t know ... I think it was when we were, we drove a good like 45 minutes to get to this big open field. This big one and we had to cut down everything; he would show us like the stuff with the yellow bark, that you break and it has yellow bark, keep it. Keep it you know that stuff with like the prickles or like some of the stuff with like some with the red berries on, you cut them, you know. And it just, I don’t know it just made me happy because it made me feel like I was helping the environment and that was something I was never able to do. I was never able to get out and start helping, you know, so when I came here it just made me feel like I could help anybody I want to. You know and it’s like...

Interviewer: Right so helping people and helping the environment was kind of like...

Lindsey: Yes it was, it was something I never could do.

Interviewer: Right.

Lindsey: My whole life, you know.

Barely 20 years old, Lindsey was several months pregnant when she sat for her interview at the NJYCP building. It was obvious, as she jumped from thought to thought, that facing the future as a young and unwed mother brought up a storm of complicated emotions. But it also seemed that reflecting back on conservation fieldwork made her feel hopeful, not just for herself, but also for the life she was about to bring into the world.

Lindsey's personality and the context for her remarks seemed to lead her to find the deepest possible meaning in working on restoring riparian environments. The comments of some other Corps members, while not as dramatic as Lindsey's, also highlighted how participating in conservation fieldwork gave them a sense of agency that stood out, not just from other Service Learning Projects with NJYCP, but also against the backdrop of the rest of their lives. For instance, the laconic and dry Peter voiced a sense of satisfaction at feeling able to do something concrete to help the environment in his part of New Jersey.

Peter: [My second high school, in Rahway] had more of [a focus on science]. It's probably more intensive because the classes are longer, but they definitely teach you more of that over there.

Interviewer: Has that been the focus in Youth Corps? Environmental topics and that kind of thing?

Peter: Um, in the classroom a little bit, but more of when we are doing a specific project we learned about that.

Interviewer: Right.

Peter: Like certain things, dangers and what you should be doing. Specifically from someone named John Parke. He's educating, you know, he talks about it when we're actually doing jobs for him, so ... And um, well it wasn't my favorite experience [laughs], but I felt like I was doing the most when we were getting rid of the invasive species for the endangered turtles. Because that was, it was just inconvenient because the invasive species was the plant species, the pricker bushes. So we had to remove all that. So it sucked, but it helps, and, I don't know, I feel like I did the most when we were doing that.

Interviewer: So, what's the biggest thing you will take with you from some of the conservation experiences, do you think, or the conservation projects?

Peter: I guess, in general, just how much we do. Like not, I can't really take anything specific from these uh, these conservation efforts, but just like just the effect of just small things we do that will have a larger effect on the environment. Like, the stake planting. When you were there at the farm and the planting just on the side of the banks and stuff so it doesn't erode, and stuff like that. You can just see, well not right now, but you'll see how much of an effect it'll have over time for the environment, so, and for specific areas.

In a passage discussed above, Carolina intuitively understood conservation fieldwork to be the difference between life and death for landscapes plagued with an invasives. Elsewhere in her interview, she connected this new awareness to feelings of responsibility and power for to her own part in helping natural areas to regain their health.

Carolina: Like you look at outside and it's like everything is dead, and I was like it's already dead, you know, like it's not gonna grow anymore. But no, they actually do grow

and like you actually gotta do stuff for it to grow. Like move stuff, like uh those woods and stuff that we moved, yeah.

Interviewer: Do you like that feeling of taking care of things?

Carolina: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: What do you like about it?

Carolina: That you gotta like, because we actually do gotta help the plants grow, you know what I mean? Like we actually gotta take care of them. Like it's not like they'll, you just... I don't know! For me it's like: oh well, you look at it and it's like they, they're growing because of us. Yeah, like if we let them die they're just gonna die.

As Carolina's comments suggest, being able to confidently recall or put in one's own words basic ecological concepts—concerning invasive species, for instance—is not a prerequisite to believing that one has performed a service related to these concepts for the natural environment. As Kevon's interview also demonstrated, having just a hazy idea of the environmental aims of conservation fieldwork can suffice as a foundation for a feeling of agency and environmental citizenship.

Interviewer: So, to kind of change subjects a lot, and it's going to be kind of a big picture question ... What would you say that nature means to you? What does nature mean to you?

Kevon: I don't know, I think I'm more different like, I feel like everybody here is really different. Like we're not like the same. Like everybody here has a big picture idea, like they think more. Uh, two things. Like if you ask somebody in a high school or something like that, what would they think nature would be, they'd probably give you like a crazy type of answer, but um, I don't know ... To me nature is, it's beautiful. It's like um, it's everything. Like I like nature myself—I like to go out. Sometimes I take walks, I like the trees, I like everything like that. Like we did a project on it.

Interviewer: Out here or in school?

Kevon: Yeah here. And it was just good like knowing that, like going out and seeing nature. We was in the woods, I don't know, where were we? I don't really know, but we were just picking the thorns out [removing invasives with NJA] and cutting and it was just beautiful, like we just like changed the whole environment, like it was crazy. So it just felt good doing it. Like I like nature, I like animals, I love animals.

Interviewer: What felt good about kind of taking out the thorn bushes and kind of making it look nice?

Kevon: When you see pictures and stuff, it's like, it looks beautiful. You know when I see pictures of nature or any type of nature, that's beautiful. But sometimes it's like, it's not. So, like when we went there it wasn't like how you would take a picture, you know. Like once you start fixing it up and you start feeling good about yourself, you know they tell you why you're doing some of the stuff you're doing. And some of the stuff is to help other animals and other things there, so it feels, you feel better about yourself and you just, you know like if you was to take that picture after, like it looks beautiful you know? It's beautiful, and you feel better and you feel like you've done something in that little section, it's pretty nice.

For Kevon, Carolina, Peter, and others, making something more “beautiful” or “pretty” is all the fuel that is needed to gain a sense of one's potential power as an environmental citizen. As much as knowledge of specific terms and concepts, this feeling of agency was a clear outcome, for many Corps members, of participating in conservation fieldwork with NJA.

Working with NJA made a big impression on many Corps members, even if no one interviewed for this report had been inspired to incorporate environmental issues into their future academic or career plans. This report would be remiss, however, if it did not give voice to the several Corps members who, when interviewed, did *not* specifically mention projects with NJA as standing out at all in their experiences at NJYCP. It is important to acknowledge these voices, not just because they likely represent an important segment of the Corps member population, but also because they show once again the obstacles that Corps members must overcome in order to finish the program.

Meg was one such person. For Meg, planting trees with NJA had blended in her memory with the many days that NJYCP took Corps members out to do park cleanups and landscaping work. Meg had suffered a severe head injury when she was younger, and only in the past two years had she begun to contemplate going back to school. For Meg, completing the NJYCP program was putting her stamina and abilities to a high test. This was a challenge that she was determined to meet. But it also meant that for Meg, and perhaps for other Corps members, as well, education was something that took place in school, and “nature” was first and foremost a place a peace—a refuge from stimulation and troubles.

Interviewer: So this whole conversation started because I asked you what being in nature meant to you, and it was really interesting for me to hear your stories. So if I said: “being environmentally friendly in your everyday life,” does that mean anything in particular to you? It can mean anything—there is no right or wrong answer.

Meg: Like I said I like animals so whenever I see a dead animal I kind of like freak out, even if it’s a skunk, which they really stink! [laughs] ... I have a soft heart towards animals. I can’t even hit like smack a dog for being bad. I’m just like: but you’re so cute, I can’t hit you! But otherwise that, like I’m mostly, my environmental interests are towards animals and like, sometimes hanging out in the woods by myself, just to tour and see different things, except for when snakes and skunks come out then I run. Like far.

Interviewer: So being environmentally friendly to you, it sounds like really means, like, being with animals, being kind to animals?

Meg: Yeah. Like over at one of our other sites, the Stein Farm, is basically we have another building where we go sometimes and just sit there and we’ll learn there instead of being in the [main NJYCP] building all the time.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Meg: There’s two goats and they’re like Youth Corp mascots. Like they go on the porch and that’s basically where they hang out when it rains. So the other day me and one of the other students, we were feeding them Ritz crackers. And we came like this close to them and the other student she was being loud, so they ran and like almost knocked the sign off the barn. But they were, like they had been there for a while. They just won’t go nowhere and everyone’s, this lady she’s like; oh well we need to get rid of them. But I was like: They’re not doing anything they’re just there! They’re trying to be Youth Corp mascots, leave them alone! [laughs] But they’re, I’ve never seen goats that close to me before.

Meg eagerly related several other anecdotes about how her time at NJYCP had brought her closer to animals: owls at the wildlife center that the cohort had visited; birds in the woods during a nature walk. At one point, she spontaneously offered that she would like to “work at a

zoo.” When the interviewer gently followed up on this possibility, however, Meg quickly backtracked:

Meg: I wouldn't really want a career... any like, I want a career... like I would work at a zoo but I wouldn't want to like further... I don't know because I would really want to basically... how can I say this? Look into more like I'm interested in it, but I don't know if I would follow-up like all the way to it. Like, just certain things interest me. I don't know about the whole nine yards about it, but I am interested in it, but it's not really for me.

Interviewer: What do you mean? Can you help me to understand what you mean?

Meg: I like the nature. I like animals, but I wouldn't really want to study like the whole world about nature.

In fact, Meg had recently started working as a housecleaner at a nearby motel. And this was an occupation that she was finding unexpectedly fulfilling. “I love my job,” she happily related. “It's just the people there like are so friendly ... and this is like my first actual job where it's like a company that's huge and people actually go there and spend their money. So I want, I do want to stay there for a while. So I'll probably see myself doing hospitality and stuff like that.”

Meg's experience at NJYCP is likely illustrative of that of many other Youth Corps members. For Corps members like Meg, who may be struggling with disabilities and whose career goals are entirely elsewhere, the environmental insights made available by NJA may not make a large impression. But even and perhaps especially for Corps members like Meg, the simple chance to get outside, to see birds and other everyday animals in their natural habitat, is a great gift—one to which they might never think to give themselves.

SECTION 3: CONCLUSION

Three years ago, New Jersey Audubon and New Jersey Youth Corps of Phillipsburg laid the cornerstone for a partnership that has benefited the natural environment in northwestern New Jersey in clear and indisputable ways. As part of the background research for this study, the author of this report has waited in the rain and hot sun with dozens of Youth Corps members and staff as John Parke pulls his mud-splattered pick-up onto a project site. Good-natured groans generally accompany the sight of many hundreds of stakes and “whips” stacked in the truck bed. Over the course of a long morning and into the afternoon, Corps members spread out along the banks of the Musconetcong River, Lopatcong Creek, or other local waterway, and take out invasive brambles with shovels and strong shears. Once the piles of thornbushes are high and springy, effort switches to driving the cores of future trees into the damp ground. Plastic tubing is used to protect saplings from deer and other animals who might unwittingly make a meal out of these hoped-for anchors for the soil and nets for pollutants dripping off adjacent farms. Pauses for commentary and conversation are frequent, and for many of the workers the sounds of shovels and mallets are filtered through pop or hip-hop music audible even to work partners without earbuds. The author of this report, like Parke and Muckle, has seen looks of unmistakable satisfaction—mixed with exhaustion—on the faces of these young adults as the lunch hour nears. And not all breaks are taken back by the trucks. More than a few Corps members have been seen standing or squatting silently down by the banks, watching the dark water flow by.

After days of exertion in the service of the community and natural environment, the question motivating this report cannot help but present itself: How are Corps members impacted by the experience of working on conservation projects with NJA? Research suggests that the NJA-NJYCP partnership has not yet achieved, in general, the most ambitious goals in the area of environmental education and professional development that might be imagined for it. In particular, no Corps member interviewed for this report had altered, or considered altering, their academic or career goals based on performing conservation fieldwork.

There can be little doubt, however, that many Corps members were moved, in an emotional way, by the experience of working with NJA. Moreover, the emotional impacts of the NJA-NJYCP partnership clearly echoed and amplified the deeper impacts of the Youth Corps program on its students. NJYCP gives young adults who have struggled in traditional classroom settings the opportunity to complete their high school education; NJYCP also helps Corps members to cultivate practical employability skills—communication, punctuality, technical literacy—that employers will appreciate. Beyond this, though, NJYCP works to instill in Corps members a sense of self-worth, confidence, and efficacy. Academic progress earns Corps members a concrete credential—a high school degree. But it is the personal growth that many Corps members experience during their four-month stay with NJYCP that deepens their ability to use this credential to change their own lives.

The partnership with NJA represents a valuable addition to the NJYCP program, in the sense that working with NJA clearly contributed to Corps members' sense of themselves as caring, effective ecological citizens, whose own efforts could make a difference in the health of the world around them. Beyond newfound knowledge about invasive species or watershed ecology, it is this emotional resonance with the positive impacts of being a Corps member that shone through most clearly in interviews for this report. Corps members more than reported feeling satisfied or excited about participating in conservation fieldwork with NJA. They vividly recalled the effort involved in hacking through dense layers of thorns, and the surprising, unfamiliar rush of fulfillment when the work was done. They were effusive in their gratitude for the opportunity to experience “wild” nature and real wildlife, and they believed that helping NJA was an experience they would not forget. In Kevon's words: *“Some of the stuff is to help other animals and other things there, so it feels, you feel better about yourself and you just, you know like if you was to take that picture after, like it looks beautiful you know?”* For many Corps members, working on conservation projects with NJA was one of the most memorable and personally affecting expressions of the “service learning” component of the NJYCP program.

Outcomes like these, rooted in emotion, memory, and nascent environmental values, may be less tangible than a high school diploma, and less dramatic than a hypothetical decision to pursue environmental science as a concentration in community college. But in the context of Corps members' tumultuous and often challenging lives, the simple and strong feeling of having helped to protect a beautiful place represents a precious achievement. Research conducted for this report clearly suggests that, for NJA and NJYCP, this is an achievement well worth building on in future years.

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