

Exploring Innovative Nature Engagement Practices

Supporting Camp Fire's Commitment to Promote Environmental Stewardship and Action

Prepared for Camp Fire by



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Introduction

Intentionally engaging young people with nature, whether in an afterschool program in an urban area or a camp in the remote wilderness can have positive and lasting benefits for young people (Deane & Harre, 2014; Delia & Krasny, 2018; Holland, Powell, Thomsen & Monz, 2018). Effective teaching that incorporates nature is often experiential and youth-centered and is not limited to natural settings (Kuo et. al, 2019). Programs that have an intentional focus on nature, environmental stewardship and justice coupled with positive youth development principles support a variety of positive youth outcomes including personal development, leadership skills, and a connection to place and community (Sethi & Eisenberg, 2020).

Camp Fire’s current strategic plan includes the commitment to “promote environmental stewardship and action.” Currently, the level of nature engagement across Camp Fire councils varies widely. Some councils have full outdoor camp facilities and incorporate nature into everything they do; other councils, especially those without dedicated outdoor facilities, often focus more on youth development and social-emotional learning.

Nature experiences not only have the potential to promote environmental stewardship and action in youth, they can also promote youth development, relationship-building, and academic learning. This report explores the innovative practices of nine nature-focused Camp Fire councils who are thoughtfully engaging young people with nature - often while also developing their social-emotional skills, cultivating youth leaders, and providing opportunities for standards-aligned STEM learning.



Project Overview

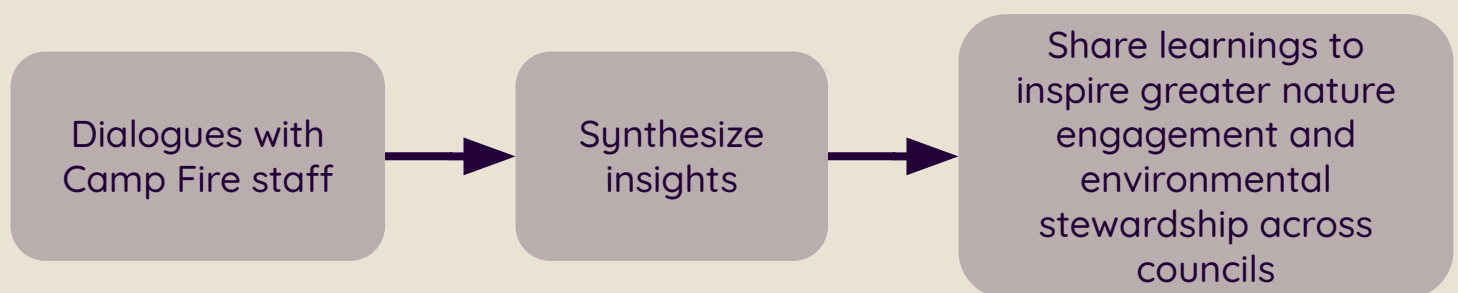
This project sought to capture and share innovative learning happening at the intersection of youth development and nature across several Camp Fire councils. These learnings can inform the implementation of Camp Fire’s strategic plan commitment to promote environmental stewardship and action across councils.

Camp Fire has long been considered a high-quality youth development organization. Nature is an important aspect of Camp Fire’s identity, yet the focus on nature has fluctuated in importance over time and varies across programs and councils. One goal of Camp Fire’s new strategic plan is to intentionally bring the focus on nature to programming across councils both in camp and afterschool settings.

Informed Change, a youth development-focused research and evaluation organization, partnered with Camp Fire National to learn about innovative ways councils are currently incorporating nature into their programming.

Councils were selected to participate based on national staff members’ recommendations. Program staff and leadership from each council participated in informal interviews or focus groups with the Informed Change team. Staff were asked about their councils’ programs, the ways they support youth nature engagement, how they approach diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) and youth leadership, and their hopes and dreams for future nature engagement across Camp Fire.

The Informed Change team synthesized the insights from council staff to identify innovative practices and approaches to successfully engaging youth in nature through their programs to create this resource.



Note: All quotes throughout this resource are from Camp Fire staff members who participated in the project. Some quotes have been lightly edited for clarity.

About the Programs

Staff members from nine Camp Fire councils participated in this project, sharing insights about their programs and work.



Participating Councils

Representatives from nine Camp Fire councils across the country participated in this project. We are grateful for the insights, time, and energy these staff members contributed to the project.

Camp Fire Central Oregon (Bend, OR)

Wesley Heredia, Director of Jugamos Afuera

Camp Fire Snohomish (Seattle, WA)

Cassie Anderson, Camp Director, Outdoor Education & Operations

Camp Fire Central Puget Sound (Seattle, WA)

Meaghan Muma, Assistant Camp Director
Megan Baumgartner, Summer Camp Program Manager

Camp Fire First Texas (Fort Worth, TX)

Brian Miller, Vice President of Outdoor Programs

Camp Fire Central Texas (Austin, TX)

Eric Imhof, Director of Operations

Camp Fire Wilani (Eugene, OR)

Elissa Kobrin, CEO

Camp Fire Alaska (Anchorage, AK)

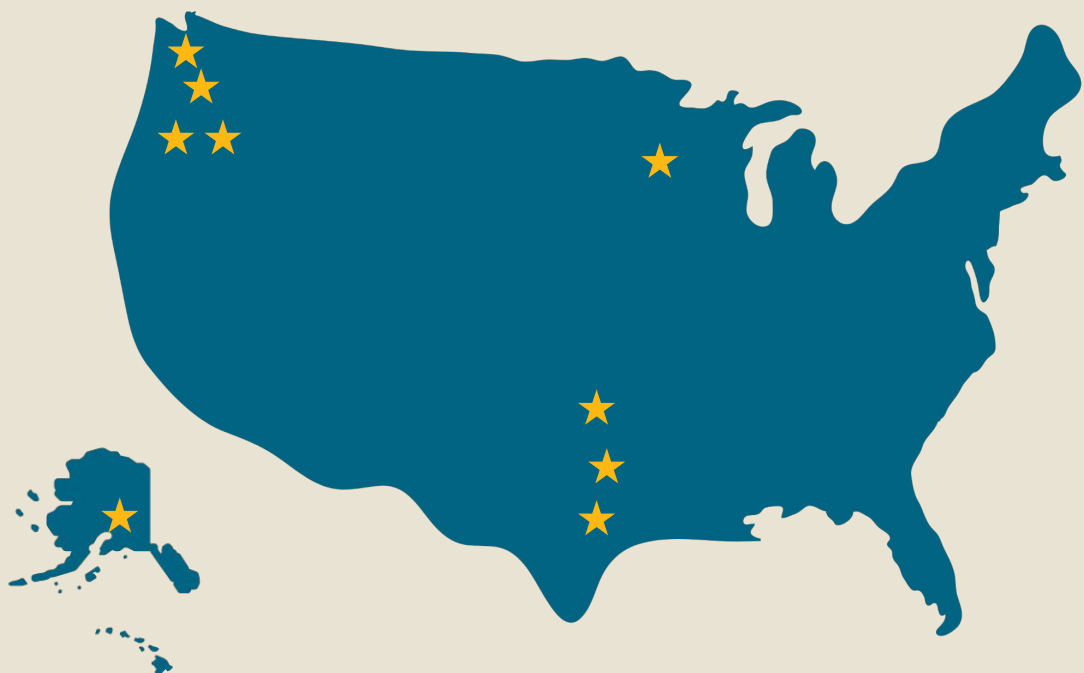
Mel Hooper, Chief Operating Officer
Rachel Rodriguez, Regional Supervisor of School Programs & Assistant Director at Camp Si-la-Meo
Nichole Boyden, Manager of School Age Programs & Summer Adventure Camp

Camp Fire Heart of Oklahoma (Oklahoma City, OK)

Penn Henthorn, Camp Director

Camp Fire Minnesota (St. Louis Park, MN)

Kelly Abraham, Director of Communications & Organizational Effectiveness
Alexis M. Murillo, Education and Digital Programs Manager
Caroline Bowen, Youth Programs Naturalist



Program Snapshots

The Camp Fire councils are all rooted in the same core youth development principles, yet each council and the programs within them are unique and tailored to the interests and needs of their communities. This resource focuses on programs within councils that most intentionally incorporate nature engagement. Snapshots of each program are listed below, including a sample activity from each council that is easily replicable in any setting.

Outdoor Education activities include outdoor play and exploration, ecology and conservation education, hiking, camping, boating, and other wilderness activities.

Recreation activities include sports, challenge activities (e.g., ropes courses or climbing walls), and camp games (e.g., gaga ball).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) activities include team-building, leadership development, relationship-building, goal-setting, and development of other social-emotional skills..

Academic and STE(A)M learning includes lessons, often aligned with state standards, designed to achieve academic learning objectives. Topics typically focus on natural sciences and use hands-on, inquiry-based approaches. STE(A)M stands for science, technology, engineering, arts, and math.

Camp Fire Central Oregon

Jugamos Afuera is a partnership program between Camp Fire Central Oregon and Vamanos Outside that serves Latinx youth in Bend, Oregon. Programming takes place primarily in local parks, but the program has also visited nearby wilderness areas. Activities include nature walks, snowshoeing, and sledding blended with SEL and reflection.

>>Sample activity: Staff lead “Pulse Checks” regularly, gathering feedback and ideas from youth to inform program activities.

Camp Fire Snohomish

Camp Killoqua’s Outdoor Education program serves school groups and delivers experiential outdoor education programming aligned with state science standards and provides team-building opportunities, primarily drawing from Project Wet, Project Wild, Wise Kids, and Project Learning Tree curriculum.

>>Sample activity: an active game that helps youth learn about food chains.

Camp Fire First Texas

The **Camp El Tesoro Outdoor Education Center** provides state standards-aligned outdoor education and recreational programming for school groups. They use Project Wild and Project Wild Aquatics curriculum as well as staff-created curriculum. **Grief Camp** serves youth who have experienced the death of a family member and provides therapeutic services at Camp El Tesoro, where staff observe that the immersive, nature-based setting often allows youth to make significant progress compared to a traditional therapy setting.

>>Sample activity: In “Bird Beak Buffet,” youth use models of different types of bird beaks to pick up distinct types of food to learn about each species’ evolution.

Camp Fire Central Texas

The **after-school program** at Camp Fire Central Texas teaches nature-focused STEAM learning to young people at a variety of urban and rural schools. Their curriculum, a blend of staff-designed content and Project Wild, combines Camp Fire’s Thrive{ology} social-emotional learning with science education through active, hands-on experiences.

>>Sample activity: Youth design, build, and test their own model of a beaver dam.

Camp Fire Central Puget Sound

The **outdoor education program at Camp Sealth** serves school groups and provides experiential outdoor education programming aligned with state science standards focusing on forest, marine, and wetland ecosystems. They use Project Wet and Project Learning Tree curriculum. Activities blend SEL, camp recreation, and outdoor living skill-building.

>>Sample activity: Outdoor educators visited a school site to teach outdoor living skills in the urban environment, including creating a shelter out of a soccer goal and building a fire in a portable grill.



Camp Fire Alaska

Camp Si-La-Meo is a fully outdoor day camp that incorporates recreation, arts and crafts, environmental education, and outdoor living skill-building. **Camp K** is a residential camp program that incorporates recreation, outdoor skill-building, and wilderness travel experiences. The **Rural Alaska Program** operates in Indigenous/Alaska Native communities and engages both youth and elders in wellness-focused programming based on Indigenous values and physical, spiritual, and mental well-being. Camp Fire staff co-facilitate programming with community members. The **afterschool program** incorporates outdoor activities, nature activities, STEM education, and SEL, drawing from Project Wet, Project Wild, and Wise Kids curriculum.

>>**Sample activity:** Youth in the afterschool program take walking field trips to cultivate comfort and enjoyment in the outdoors.



Camp Fire Heart of Oklahoma

Camp DaKaNi delivers camp recreation programs in a natural environment within the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. **Camp CANOE** serves young people on the autism spectrum, delivering camp programming onsite at Camp DaKaNi that is designed to support youth with autism. Both programs focus on recreation-based SEL activities in an outdoor setting.

>>Sample activity: Camp DaKaNi includes an area called “The Fort” where youth can engage in unstructured exploration and play in a natural space.

Camp Fire Wilani

Outdoor School is a state-mandated and funded program for all 5th and 6th graders to engage in outdoor education. The program uses the BEETLES curriculum to deliver student-centered, nature-focused experiential learning that meets the state’s academic requirements and provides opportunities for social-emotional skill development.

>>Sample activity: In the staff-designed activity “Silent Hike,” youth go on a short hike alone, guided by a set of cards that prompt them to engage with their senses, interact with nature, and reflect on their experience at Outdoor School.

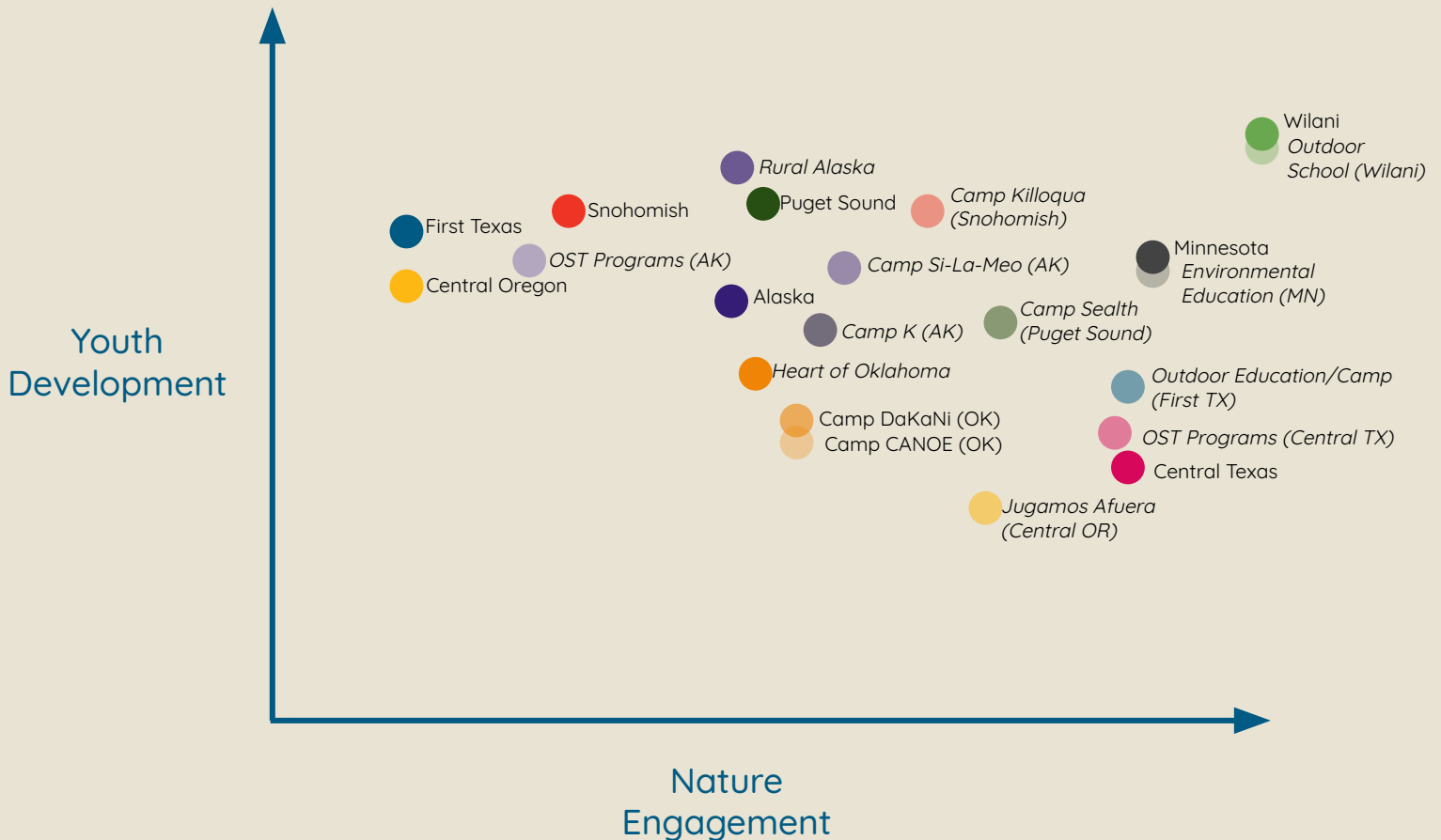
Camp Fire Minnesota

Camp Fire Minnesota provides **environmental education programs at Camp Tanadoona, schools, community organizations, and online**, primarily serving youth who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. These hands-on programs include a blend of standards-aligned STEM learning, environmental education, and social-emotional learning. The council introduced virtual “field trips” during the pandemic and will continue offering them due to their popularity.

>>Sample activity: Writing nature poetry provides an opportunity for youth to engage with nature in a more introspective way.



Blending Nature and Youth Development



During dialogues, council representatives reflected on their councils and programs and their level of intentionality toward both youth development and nature engagement. This continuum serves as a tool for practitioners to reflect on where their programs are situated currently and to identify areas of strength and where they may want to grow.

Dots represent where council representatives placed their council and their nature-focused programs. When multiple council representatives participated in conversations, dots are placed at the average location identified by representatives. Bold-colored dots represent councils as a whole and light-colored dots represent specific programs.

Describing Programs

Program staff often used “outdoor” and “nature” or “nature-based” interchangeably to describe programming. Both terms resonate among staff, but “nature” as a term was used most often and seemed to capture a broader understanding than “outdoors,” particularly because nature experiences are not limited to the outdoors. The words “outdoor education,” “environment,” or “environmental” were used more in programs that were tied to state science-based standards and not as commonly used at camps focused on outdoor recreation.



“Camp is hard to describe - that whole ‘magic’ of camp that exists. The way I’ve described it is it’s really about connecting and discovering.”

Resources

Staff

High-quality staff are one of the most important resources for Camp Fire programs. Staff members include:

- Environmental educators
- Recreation/camp professionals
- Youth workers
- Former teachers
- Recent college graduates and college students
- Specialists, e.g., geologists

Training and Development

Councils prepare staff in different ways to set them up for success. Many councils emphasize relationship-building, supporting youth mental health, social-emotional skill-building, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Some councils also provide training to staff in specific curricula they use in their programming.

Funding

In addition to general fundraising, councils support their nature-based programming through foundation grants, fees for service (especially for summer camps and outdoor education), and grants for specific groups (e.g., a mental health-focused nonprofit providing funding for grief camp).

Spotlight:

Camp Fire Alaska Emphasizing mental health support in staff training

At Camp Fire Alaska, staff receive specific training on trauma-informed care, emotional first aid, and responsive care, which enables them to support youth holistically.

Curriculum

Councils draw from a variety of curricula and other sources to shape programming content.

External Curricula

- [Project Wet](#)
- [Project Wild](#)/Project Wild Aquatics
- [Project Learning Tree](#)
- [BEETLES Outdoor Education](#)

Camp Fire Curricula

- Thrive{ology}
- Leave No Trace
- [Camp Fire Wise Kids/Wise Kids Outdoors](#)

“Home Cooking”

- Staff-created activities based on previous work, field of study, independent research, and their own passions and interests

Partnerships

Councils cultivate partnerships that support or expand their programming.

These partnerships include:

- Collaborations with teachers to co-create standards-aligned outdoor education curriculum
- Connections with state and national parks or nature centers that provide funding, facilities, and curriculum
- Higher education institutions
- Other youth-serving organizations

Spotlight:

Camp Fire Wilani Using the BEETLES curriculum for student-centered nature-based learning

Camp Fire Wilani has had great success using the BEETLES (Better Environmental Education, Teaching, Learning & Expertise Sharing) curriculum developed at the University of California at Berkeley in their outdoor school program.

A staff member explained, “BEETLES is profoundly inclusive, profoundly easy to administer, and can turn a layman into someone who comes off as an expert in a short amount of time. It is student-centered, nature-focused, values prior student knowledge and makes connections to new information. . . . Every lesson we teach is designed to center youth voice.”

Innovative practices to engage youth with nature

Insights from across programs

Four key themes emerged from conversations with council staff members in which they shared what works to engage youth with nature:

- 1) Trusted and supported staff set the stage for nature engagement.
- 2) Relationships are the foundation.
- 3) Nature can be experienced by anyone, anywhere.
- 4) Nature-based learning is a helpful tool for youth development.

Each theme is supplemented with illustrative quotes and concrete examples of activities that councils can use to increase their focus on nature engagement.

Trusted and supported staff set the stage for nature engagement.

When staff feel they can follow their passion for nature and design specific lessons based on their content expertise, their excitement transfers to youth. Staff shared that when they are trusted to “get creative,” they feel well prepared to engage young people with nature.

They also appreciate caring colleagues who provide emotional support and share their own expertise, ideas, and knowledge.

One staff member noted that when planning and facilitating activities, they know “it’s okay to make mistakes and try again.”

“The instructor has to be excited about learning and going on the journey with the kids. Enthusiasm is key - and more important than subject matter expertise. Instructors have to love unpredictability. It’s okay for the instructor to say, ‘I don’t know how this will turn out, but let’s try it together.’”

Relationships are the foundation.

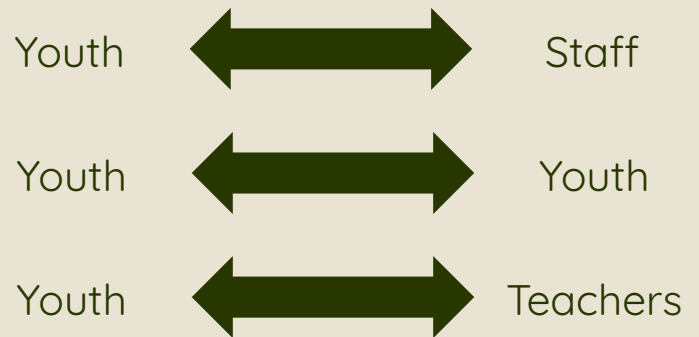
For young people to become comfortable in new environments, trusting and caring relationships need to be built between staff and youth as well as between youth and their peers. Staff talked about creating caring, inclusive spaces for young people to feel like they belonged.

Staff noted that they were just as attentive to peer-to-peer relationships as they were to staff-to-youth relationships. Many said that connection with others set the tone for young people to connect with nature.

Staff built relationships through having **meaningful conversations, goal setting, creating shared learning agreements or group norms**, focusing on **team-building activities**, and **making sure everyone felt included**.

As one staff participant said, “Everyone is welcome here.”

“Relationships
are always
number one.”





“

When kids - or any person - know themselves and feel connected to themselves, their community, and the world, it's a more holistic approach.

”

“We intentionally create an inclusive environment where kids feel safe.”



Nature can be experienced by anyone, anywhere.

Many staff members shared that nature shouldn't be thought of as "out there" or only something to be experienced in the wilderness or camp settings. They talked about **slowing down** and encouraging youth to **be present, take in their surroundings**, and **connect with the nature around them** - whether it's a backyard, the woods, or even a parking lot.

One staff member noted, "If you look around in a parking lot, you often see different plants breaking through the surface or you can turn to the sky and see different kinds of trees or birds." Even in the most urban settings, there are ample opportunities to experience nature.

Others suggested **nature engagement can be "scaffolded."** As one staff member explained, "Some kids like the outdoors and some don't. We try to bring activities outside. . . it's helpful to get them outdoors more and more, and scaffold nature engagement. Over time, you can incorporate more teaching about nature."

Activity Spotlights:

Ground Circles

Set a hula hoop or circle of rope on the ground and spend 5-10 minutes exploring this miniature nature world. Write or mentally note every living organism within your circle.

Micro Hikes

Take a "micro hike" on your hands and knees to see nature from a different perspective.

Walking Field Trip

Go for a walk and discuss what nature you can see, smell, or hear in your environment.

“Nature can be a parking lot, a backyard, or a city park. Nature can be lots of different things.”

Staff participants explained that although being outdoors in nature provides unique and transformative experiences, nature can also be brought inside and into the classroom through interactive lessons and activities.



Spotlight:

Camp Fire Central Texas

“STEM is more than just Legos and robots.”

Camp Fire Central Texas uses STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and nature together to engage youth in kindergarten through 8th grade.

Young people learn about natural science, including lessons about wildlife, predator-prey relationships, local animals, animal tracks, astronomy, relativity, space-time, and more. Staff limit lecture time by prioritizing hands-on activities and games that allow them to achieve their learning objectives. Youth have opportunities to build and test models. They also incorporate arts activities such as stop-motion animation, nature drawing, and nature photography, expanding from STEM to STEAM.

A staff member explained, “We think about science topics that would engage them. For example, the fluffy t-rex, back holes, or time travel. I often watch PBS and think ‘How could this be a game?’ So much is trial and error. . . I always start with, ‘What do they seem interested in?’ and build an activity from there.”

Nature-based learning is a helpful tool for youth development.

Staff participants shared the value of nature-based learning as a tool for youth development because it can engage young people in different ways than traditional classroom methods.

Nature-based learning is:

Hands-on, active, and playful: Staff facilitate using a fun, playful, and less “lecture-based” approach than traditional classroom learning, even for outdoor education programs tied to state academic standards. Kids get a chance to “play in the dirt.”

Adaptive and responsive: Lessons are adaptable to different learning levels. Young people “can get meaning and knowledge at any age.”

Focused on young people’s questions:

Staff ask youth what they are curious about, which leads to rich discussion and hypothesis creation. Staff often intentionally invite young people to observe their surroundings, ask “Why” questions, and connect their learning to scientific discovery. For example, the BEETLES curriculum used at Camp Fire Wilani teaches every child that they can “be a scientist if they are just curious.”

“We ask kids questions all the time to see what they know, what they’ve learned, and let them use curiosity to discover on their own.”





Reflective: Staff ask youth, “What just happened? It was fun, but what was it? How did it impact you?” These guided reflections encourage young people to make meaning from their experiences in programs.

About resilience: Youth learn about nature’s resilience and how to connect that to their experiences meeting challenges in their own lives.

Designed to inspire care and stewardship for the environment: One staff participant noted that the young people they work with do not typically go outside. This staff member wants to “change the culture so that young people would be more accepting of environmental stewardship and want to pursue careers in forestry or other outdoor-focused or green careers.”

“We need to create the next generation of stewards of the environment - if they don’t care about the environment or feel comfortable, why would they protect it?”

“

“Nature is resilience, adaptability, and evolution. Resilience is the quality we are trying to build in kids. Things happen that you have no control over, and you can still grow and thrive and learn from that experience. Nature learns from its experience through adaptation, and you can see that through so many things no matter where you are.”

”

Impact

Staff members shared a range of evaluation methods they use to capture program impact and the growth and development they have seen from youth program participants, including:

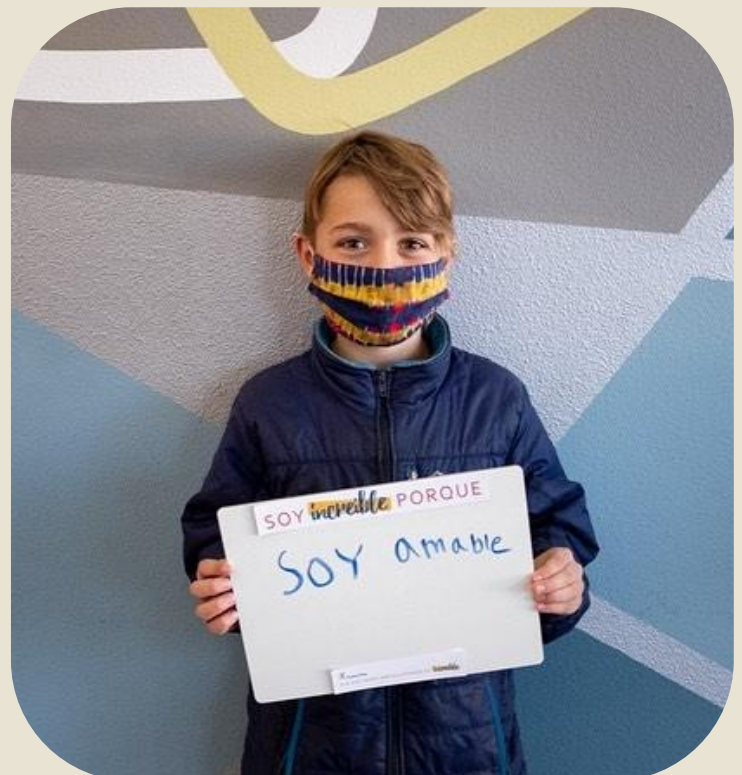
- 1) Confidence and leadership development
- 2) Authentic Relationships
- 3) A Deeper Connection to Nature
- 4) Experiencing Equity and Inclusion
- 5) Improved Mental and Physical Health

Evaluation

Councils and programs measure youth outcomes in a variety of ways: the Youth Program Quality Assessment, Camp Fire's national survey, teacher and parent surveys, staff surveys, informal conversations and observations, some do youth surveys, and one program conducts several focus groups at camp for marketing purposes. Some have created their own survey especially if they are applying for STEM grants and need more questions related to STEM outcomes. One program uses the Children's Environmental Perception Scale which measures connectedness to nature, ecofinity, and eco awareness. Another uses tools provided by the American Camp Association. In one afterschool program where middle schoolers have choices to go to Camp Fire programming or other activities, they "vote with their feet."

Getting a good sample size can be difficult for some programs, and they are looking to add more qualitative ways of collecting data and ways to collect longer-term impact data. One program was working to figure out how to decolonize their evaluation methods.. Most said they would like to create a clearer plan for measurement and would like to work on ways to better capture the experiences youth are having in their programs, especially related to nature engagement.

"The youth we work with are more curious about the outdoors and activities now. They are sharing more in circle reflections, are less timid, and able to open up more and have gained the words to express what they're thinking."



Outcomes

Confidence and Leadership Development

The impact of nature engagement, especially coupled with intentional youth development practice, leads to positive outcomes for young people. Though programs ran for different lengths of time from half-days, to a week, and to every day after school, many staff participants shared examples of young people's increased confidence after participation. Some staff who survey parents said that those parents were amazed after that their child seemed more confident and open to trying new things after a week of camp.

Young people also increased their confidence as leaders. One staff participant gave an example of a group of middle school girls they worked with. When the staff member needed to leave for a conference, the girls led the class for a whole week on their own. The staff member recalled, "they joked about how they didn't need me anymore."

"They like going outside now, they are applying what we were doing to other subjects in school, they are overcoming setbacks, solving problems, progressing in their SEL skills, and overall more interested in nature and the outdoors."

Authentic Relationships

Young people came away from a variety of Camp Fire experiences with new or strengthened authentic relationships with adults and their peers. For example, teachers who bring their students to camp for a week for outdoor education often say they see their students in a "new light." The reverse is also true - students often say that because of camp, they began to see their teacher as a "real person." As one staff participant noted, "teachers love bringing kids in the fall because they get to build relationships from the start, and bring learnings from camp back to the classroom, versus in the spring, there are more preconceived notions about how kids are."

Outcomes

Deeper Connection to Nature

Staff noted young people had a deeper connection to nature and felt more comfortable in nature and the outdoors after participating in programming. One staff member noted that it's rewarding when kids start to "get comfortable in the darkness and start feeling safe." In one afterschool program, a staff participant said that the young people they worked with who normally were not interested in going outside became more excited to go to the park and name what they want to do. "They are asking to go camping. They are more curious about the outdoors and activities."

"For kids who have never been outside the city, they are just blown away by the environment. I've heard them say, 'So this where they keep the stars!'"

Experiencing Equity and Inclusion

As we will note in the following section, Camp Fire councils are each on their own journey towards diversity, equity, inclusion, and access in all of their programs, but some of their efforts are already beginning to show promise. Several of the staff participants shared how their DEIA efforts helped young people feel more accepted and included. One young person was able to experience camp for the first time because one of the programs received a grant to purchase an all-terrain wheelchair. As one staff member recalled, "she lit up and was so happy." Because the wheelchair needed other people to move it, it also created a sense of teamwork and inclusion with peers. In another program, they focus on making camp accessible for youth of color from urban areas. At the end of the week, young people who had never been in a camp setting talked about how special their experience was and how much they enjoyed being there.

Outcomes

Improved Physical & Mental Health

Mental health was an important focus for several programs. One of the councils embedded mental health into their overall well-being goals. As they have made this more of a priority, staff noticed young people being more open about their mental health struggles. Because of training, staff were also better able to recognize when young people needed mental health support and connected them with resources. In another program focusing on young people who had lost a loved one, staff told us that because of the camp environment and being able to build relationships and trust quickly with peers, young people often made large strides in their coping skills.



Staff in another program noted that one of the “whys” for their focus on nature engagement is the research that has shown that time spent interacting with nature leads to lower stress levels in the body. Contact with nature (including urban green space, not just remote nature settings) can positively affect mental and physical health.

“What would usually take 6 months of therapy can often happen in a week.”

Promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and access

Participating staff members shared their councils' approaches to including and supporting youth with a diverse range of identities. These approaches shape young people's experiences in Camp Fire programming as well as councils' policies and procedures.

Councils' DEIA approaches are responsive to their communities.

Some council representatives shared that they approach inclusion in ways that equitably provide what each camper needs. For example, one council hosts students from a school that serves youth who are experiencing homelessness. Originally, these campers had their own groups at camp and were isolated from the campers from other schools. Now, they include students from this school in all the groups and make sure they have everything they need to be included, safe, and successful.



Spotlight:

Camp Fire First Texas

Equitable inclusion without singling anyone out

At Camp Fire First Texas, rather than adding a 1:1 staff member to provide extra support to youth who need it (for example, due to a physical or developmental disability), the council increases the counselor-to-camper ratio for the whole group. This ensures that all youth feel included rather than singled out. They have also found this to be helpful for youth who may not have been identified as needing additional support.

“We’re not challenging them, they’re challenging themselves.”

Multiple councils use a “challenge by choice” approach, which encourages youth to challenge themselves, but emphasizes that the extent to which they challenge themselves is their choice. For example, at Camp Fire Heart of Oklahoma, staff explain to youth that their choices for how to get down from the zipline tower include going down the zipline forward, backward, or walking back down the stairs - and that they get to choose.

Physical accessibility was also brought up as a priority frequently across councils. In outdoor and wilderness settings, ensuring physical accessibility can be a challenge and is an area where multiple councils want to improve their practices. Camp Fire Wilani purchased an all-terrain wheelchair (pictured) to improve physical accessibility.



Spotlight:

Camp Fire Central Oregon

Culturally-specific nature-based programming

The Jugamos Afuera program in Central Oregon intentionally focuses on serving the Latinx community in Bend. The programming is culturally relevant and tailored to Latinx youth and their families. Staff reflect the ethnic identities of the youth participants.

A staff member explained, “I’m making the program as equitable as possible by hiring staff that are of the community. We’re trying to meet kids where they are and provide food and resources. There isn’t another program that’s doing anything like this. It’s groundbreaking and difficult, but it’s a model that other programs could follow.”



Councils infuse equity into their policies, procedures, and practices.

While historically Camp Fire has been rooted in tradition, councils recognize that change is an important part of their commitment to continuous improvement in diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility.

For some councils, this involves prioritizing hiring staff whose identities reflect the identities of the young people they serve. It also involves creating a safe and supportive environment for both youth and staff so they can stretch themselves beyond their comfort zones. Some DEIA initiatives involve facility changes, such as making all restrooms gender neutral.

Staff receive DEIA training before starting programming as well. At Camp Fire Wilani, their team makes a significant investment in hiring an external DEIA trainer each year. Multiple councils have DEIA committees or task forces to evaluate policies, procedures, and practices through an equity lens.

Access to programming is a key aspect of DEIA progress. Some councils have grant-funded programs to provide scholarships to youth who would not otherwise have the financial opportunity to attend camp or other programs. Money is not the only barrier to access, however. Staff at Camp Sealh, which is located on an island, noted that transportation has been an access barrier for youth to attend camp. The history of racism in wilderness spaces and outdoor programs also presents a challenge for access and inclusion: some youth and their families may not believe that nature programs are for them.

“We’re experts at change.

We have a culture of change.”

Repairing Harm

Externally, councils are working to acknowledge and repair past harm to and appropriation of Indigenous groups and culture. Camps are located on stolen land and many have names drawn from Indigenous languages. Many councils have incorporated land acknowledgements into their programs.

Other councils are working to update the language they use in naming spaces and describing programming or activities to recognize Indigenous groups when appropriate or to change names when appropriate. They are also working to recognize Indigenous knowledge and the Indigenous origins of activities in their programming, such as ethnobotany or snowshoeing.

“We start all of our programming with land acknowledgement. It’s important to acknowledge the harm and welcome every kid who wants to attend no matter their background - they all need to come, feel welcome, and have their culture honored.”

Spotlight:

Camp Fire Central Puget Sound Building relationships with Tribal schools

Camp Fire Central Puget Sound has fostered positive relationships with local Tribal schools. Thanks to the trust they have built among school leaders and council leaders, the Tribal school leaders have invited the council to continue seeking their feedback. This has been particularly helpful for the council as they are able to work together with Indigenous leaders to avoid cultural appropriation.

Centering Youth Voice

Council staff shared many examples of the ways in which young people are involved in planning and decision-making within programs and the leadership opportunities available to them. Many councils shared that wherever possible, staff empower young people to drive their own experiences in nature. They also celebrate youth and their contributions.

Youth plan and make decisions.

Youth voice and choice are built in to many of the programs across councils. Staff shared that in summer camp programs, youth tend to have more opportunities to plan and make decisions, while outdoor education programs can be more teacher- or school-driven. At Camp Sealh, they are working on better translating the voice and choice opportunities in summer camp into outdoor education programs.

At Camp Fire Central Texas, they scaffold youth voice and choice over the course of their school-based programs. Kids plan lessons, choose topics to learn about, and come up with activities or games to play. In middle school, groups tell their instructors what they want to do, and instructors figure out how to do it. With middle school kids, they usually incorporate a campout or field trip that lets them practice skills like fire-building and prepare for the adventure by shopping for food and choosing how to cook it.

At Camp Fire Wilani, programs use the BEETLES curriculum, which upends traditional top-down teaching methods. This curriculum allows youth to choose how their day goes. The things they learn are informed by their prior knowledge and what is important and interesting to them.

Spotlight:

Camp Fire Heart of Oklahoma

Youth create a “home in the woods” - their piece of nature for the week

Campers’ “home in the woods” serves as a home base for their time at camp. Each group has their own campsite, and they get to decorate it and cook meals there. It’s their own piece of nature for the week, and before they leave, they put it back to how it was, which also reinforces the conservation principle of “leave no trace.”

Youth hold leadership roles.

Many councils have formal opportunities for youth to serve in leadership roles. These include counselor-in-training programs at camps, opportunities to lead among peers and take on jobs like cleaning up or running activities, and serving as junior leaders who plan activities and even address discipline. At some sites, youth work together with staff to plan and facilitate activities for their peers.

Leadership roles include:

- Counselor-in-training
- Peer leaders
- Junior program leaders
- Youth activity planners



Looking Ahead

Re-envisioning the role of nature across Camp Fire programs

This section explores specific ways every Camp Fire program can engage more deeply with nature. It also explores staff members' hopes and dreams for the future and the potential Camp Fire has to continue to grow as a leading organization in the fields of youth development and conservation.

Where to Begin

Staff working in camp settings could see how the “magic of camp” and the ways youth engage with nature in those settings could translate to out-of-school time programs. Staff see nature as a tool for youth development that can be incorporated into any setting - rural, urban, or suburban. Some councils, like Camp Fire Central Texas, have already incorporated nature-based inquiry into all of their afterschool activities and have translated those approaches to the camp in their council. Learning can go both ways, and many staff participants said they would be excited to have opportunities to learn across camp and out-of-school-time settings to develop a deeper focus on nature engagement for all Camp Fire youth.

“If we want kids to become environmental stewards, it has to begin with connection.”



Getting Started

Expand what counts as “nature” and develop a “nature mindset.” Staff shared that a great way to get started incorporating more nature engagement into programming is to help young people see that nature is everywhere, in yards, parks, gardens, and along sidewalks. If they go to camp, help young people see the parallels between what they experience at camp and what they can find at home or at their school. One staff participant described it as “switching your lens” and “being creative with what you have.”

Give youth opportunities for inquiry. Show them how to identify leaves, trees, or macroinvertebrates (animals large enough to see without a microscope) that they might find near their home. As one staff member explained, “It helps youth think about environmental justice, social justice, and stewardship when it’s close to home.”

Another staff participant noted, “There is a lot that [kids] can do in a city setting. It’s getting kids to understand that it’s still nature and connecting it to their personal experience.”

Spotlight:

Camp Fire Minnesota
“Who we are is nature education.”

Camp Fire Minnesota redefined their focus and program offerings to center nature in everything they do, whether at their camp facility or inside an urban school building.



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“Nature is a tool
for youth
development.
Use it.”

”

Re-envision nature as a tool to accomplish goals and support good work that's already happening. Staff participants talked about the idea that focusing on nature engagement doesn't have to add cost or take away from program goals, but it can help staff accomplish what they are already doing. For example, councils can explore how nature can build social inclusion in different ways than in the classroom.

Invite camp staff with outdoor education expertise into school-based settings to lead workshops and activities. Staff suggested inviting year-round afterschool staff to outdoor education training so they can get ideas to use at club and afterschool programming. They noted that Outdoor Education staff could also visit school-based programs to do nature-focused engaging workshops.

For example, one afterschool program brought in camp staff and they taught youth how to make a shelter with a soccer net and built a fire in a tiny portable grill - the kids and teachers loved it. They also suggested seeking insights from organizations in cities running nature programs.

Spotlight:

Camp Fire Snohomish School-based staff attend outdoor education training

School-based staff visit Camp Fire Snohomish's Camp Killoqua to learn about outdoor education with camp staff. They bring these learnings back to the classroom to integrate nature into out-of-school-time programming.

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It's about learning how nature can be used, and ways to incorporate it. It can be a patch of grass or something you bring into the classroom. You can engage with nature inside a classroom. A lot of people don't know what to do or have a lot on their plate, so they can't develop their own. Little things could be done to spark the idea of using nature. It's about getting people to think in a new way and have a mindset shift.

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Hopes and Dreams

Staff members across the councils were energized by Camp Fire's strategic commitment to "promote environmental stewardship and action." They were excited to share strategies and approaches in their programs that are effective to engage youth with nature.

They also shared their hopes and dreams for Camp Fire as an organization moving into the future:

Nature engagement is utilized as a youth development tool across all programs.

Councils have more opportunities to connect and share resources.

Camp Fire is "at the table" with other prominent conservation organizations for national conversations about environmental sustainability.

Camp Fire national supports all councils to integrate and operationalize youth development, nature engagement, and equity into their programs.



"We want councils to have nature-based programs *and* not forget who has been marginalized typically. Everyone has to be part of the solution to help the environment. We can't exclude marginalized youth - we need them to become stewards now and in the future."

“

It could have a lot of impact across the whole country if we're sharing resources, mistakes, and goals.

”



“Camp Fire is known for youth development and compared to organizations like the Scouts. I would love to see how a specific focus on science and nature would set Camp Fire apart. Make this Camp Fire’s reputation. It’s not just about camping or uniforms, it’s about connecting kids to nature.”

Camp Fire's Unique Opportunity

Camp Fire is a strong voice and leader in the field of youth development. The variety of offerings from after-school programs and clubs to camping experiences rooted in research-based positive youth development principles meaningfully engage and help youth grow across the country. Camp Fire's commitment to connecting youth not only with themselves and others, but also with nature, sets it apart from many other youth-serving organizations that either focus primarily on youth development or nature and conservation.

Using insights from conversations with councils focusing on nature engagement, Camp Fire is poised to deepen the focus on nature across all programs. Camp Fire's commitment to youth development, equity, and nature engagement situates the organization as an important and unique leader in national conversations in both youth development and conservation spaces. This intersectional focus has the potential to lead to intermediate outcomes that, in turn, could influence long-term environmental stewardship and action outcomes for youth. Increasing the nature engagement focus across programs leverages Camp Fire's already strong youth development and social-emotional learning practices.

Camp Fire is strategically positioned lead the way in thoughtfully bridging these fields and creating generative spaces for increased intersectional thinking and leadership at the national level.



Recommendations Based on Learnings from Councils:

- Create and regularly convene a national Camp Fire “community of practice” dedicated to sharing ideas and creating resources for all the councils
- Assess the nature engagement needs of out-of school time programs
- Develop a practical resource centering nature engagement, youth development and equity that can be used across contexts
- Develop measurement tools to assess nature engagement across programs
- Create opportunities for nature-focused professional development



A Vision for Growth...

Staff members shared the different ways their programs engage youth with nature. Many noted that it begins with connection. Others said that having regular discussions about nature naturally led to conversations about climate change and climate justice. Camp Fire's unique approach is well-suited to provide scaffolded opportunities for young people to grow in their nature-based interests. The practices and activities highlighted in this resource provide examples for the ways in which additional Camp Fire councils can build on current strengths to grow further.

Camp Fire recognizes the barriers, such as systemic racism and economic inequity, that prevent young people from accessing nature and nature-based programming and perpetuate the long history of white supremacy in nature and wilderness programming.

While many councils are actively working to address these barriers, there is still work to be done. This work is not separate from youth development and nature engagement; rather, it is integral to the success of both.

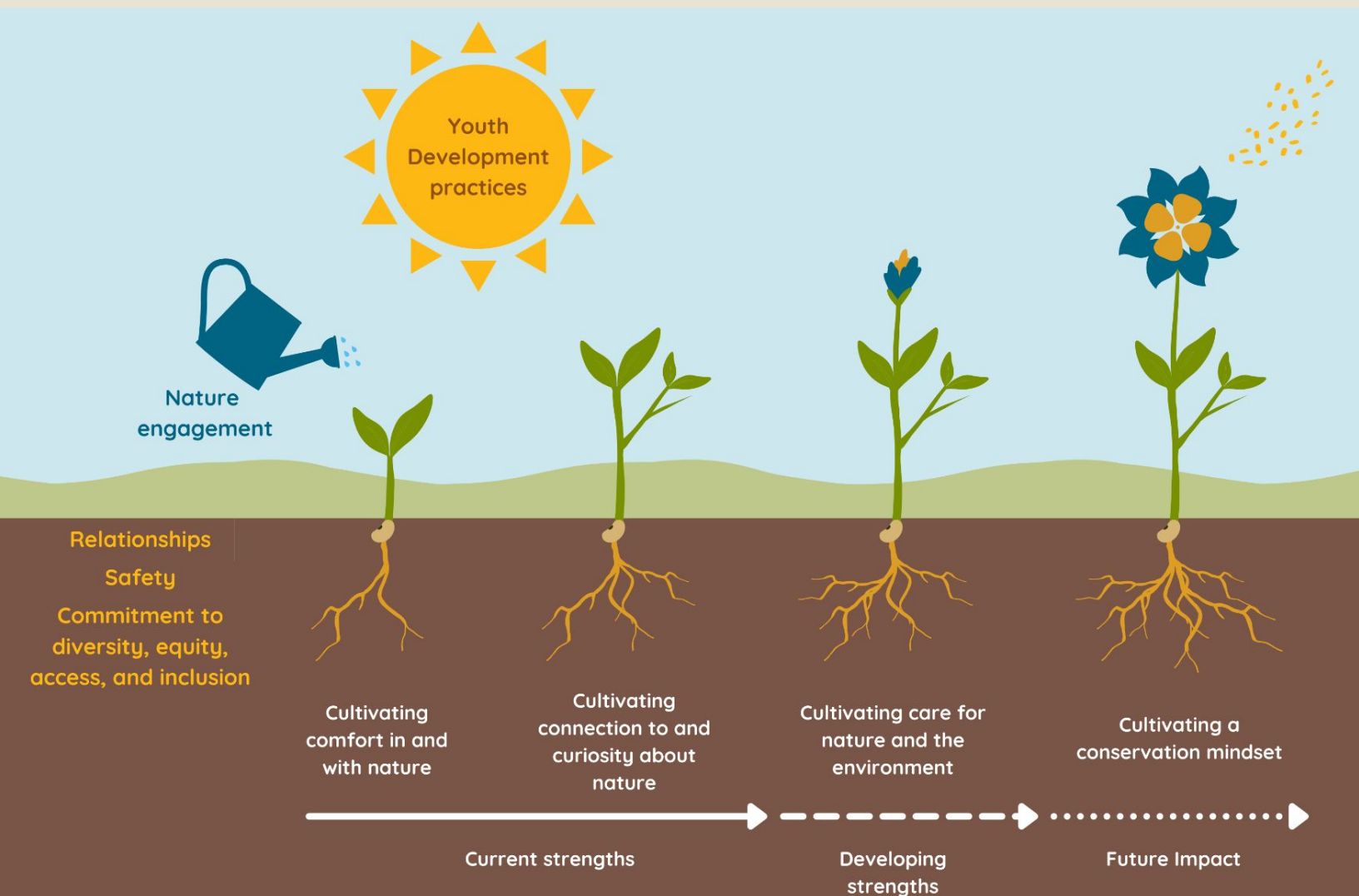
“People first have to see themselves in the environment and love it.”



From Connection to Conservation

Camp Fire is planting the seeds to grow a new generation of environmental stewards. Just as a plant requires sunlight, water, and soil to grow, youth need essential elements to become environmental stewards. The unique blend of youth development practices, nature engagement, relationships, safety, and commitment to diversity, equity, access, and inclusion positions Camp Fire to scaffold environmental stewardship over time by cultivating comfort in nature, connection to and curiosity about nature, care for nature and the environment, and a conservation mindset.

This visual depicts Camp Fire's opportunity to intentionally invite youth to grow from connection to caring to actively working to protect and conserve our natural environment.



Informed Change

Informed Change meets organizations where they are and provides research, evaluation, and facilitation to catalyze impactful innovation and transformation. We are motivated by the vision of a more just and equitable future for everyone, with a particular focus on young people.

We value translating research findings into reports and other creative mediums that are actionable, relevant, and useful to practitioners and their advocates. We are skilled in illuminating key insights or themes from within large amounts of data and complexity. We are driven to share findings and create tools that are understandable, helpful, and compelling.



Jenna Sethi, Ph.D.
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