

Civic Engagement Track Summary

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TRACK COMMITTEE

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INTRODUCTION. The *2020 Vision* (http://www.Wilderness.net/toolboxes/documents/50th/2020_Vision.pdf) is a statement of intent for action in the next five years by the federal agencies in the U.S. charged with stewardship, science and training for the National Wilderness Preservation System. This vision, signed by agency leaders at the conference, included five priorities, one of which is to “foster relevancy of Wilderness to contemporary society by inspiring and nurturing life-long connections between people of diverse cultures and Wilderness.” The purpose of the conference’s Civic Engagement Track was to honor this promise by increasing understanding of barriers to and opportunities for nurturing, creating, and in some instances, restoring these connections between Wilderness and diverse populations.

BUILDING A DIVERSE COALITION FOR WILDERNESS. The cultural communities sessions in the Civic Engagement Track were carefully crafted from enthusiastic proposals to present creative ideas about relationships between Wilderness and American Indians, Alaska Natives, urban and rural youth, Hispanics, African Americans, citizen groups, NGOs, and the greater international wildlands community. The conference placed specific focus on inviting and including Native Peoples with a primary goal of lending these, our original peoples, a free voice with which to speak to the Wilderness community. While this conference may have been a milestone event in such regards, it only began to open the door to developing the types of honest communications that are imperative to create, enhance and maintain quality partnerships with Native and cultural communities.

The *Voices of Wilderness Across Cultures—Ways We Engage* panel highlighted the struggles faced by underserved communities and minorities. Panelists provided solutions for managers and program directors to use in their organizations. *Walking it Off*, a session on the benefits of Wilderness for war veterans, featured ways to engage and tap the strengths of this service-oriented demographic. Veterans organizations have documented the restorative values of Wilderness for our veterans and have continuously proven that these honorable men and women serve, in part, to protect wild places.

Moreover, African American, Hispanic and Asian agency and non-agency Wilderness advocates from a variety of disciplines played key roles in many of the conference plenary and concurrent sessions, throughout all six tracks. These meaningful, and in many cases inspirational presentations demonstrated the importance to agency managers and NGO Wilderness leaders of recognizing and harnessing the dedication of people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

The conference was a primary example of just how many untapped opportunities exist to engage people of all ethnic and socio-economic conditions at “*all levels*” of Wilderness stewardship. Speakers stressed that the time is ripe to actively seek ways to honestly and respectfully engage our Native and cultural community Wilderness neighbors in all aspects of Wilderness, even in these difficult times of limited budgets and increasing stewardship complexity.

WILDERNESS INTERNATIONAL. While the “Wilderness Movement” extends much longer than the 50 years celebrated at this conference (to before the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964), it also extends across our North American borders to Canada and Mexico and around the world. The *International Journal of Wilderness* is over 20 years old, and though it is dominated by articles about the U.S. written by U.S. authors, there have been many special issues focused on burgeoning and successful Wilderness programs around the

globe. These broader-based articles help North American readers better understand the influence of our “Wilderness Movement” on world-scale conservation and increasingly suggest new and creative approaches from abroad for accomplishing U.S. Wilderness protection objectives.

Similarly, the World Wilderness Congress has met ten times, beginning in 1977, and continues to be the leader in this area by providing an international opportunity to explore the Wilderness concept in other cultures in both legislative and policy contexts. While at least 11 nations have implemented Wilderness protection policies, there continue to be differences in the definition of Wilderness across cultural and geographic boundaries. Furthermore, while delegates in the International Perspectives session were enthused to learn more about Wilderness applications around the world and of the positive influence U.S. leadership has, the focus continually fell back to the future challenges of working with our North American neighbors to assure trans-boundary protection objectives are met.

A new and exciting partnership along the U.S. border with Canada is aimed at protecting an international treasure – the largest expanse of public green space in the heart of North America – the Heart of the Continent. While borders, rules, and regulations differ across these lands from Quetico Provincial Park, Superior National Forest (Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness), Voyageurs National Park, Grand Portage National Monument, numerous Minnesota state forest lands and parks and Ontario’s provincial parks, their cumulative value greatly exceeds piecemeal protection.

This type of collaboration has many possible benefits, with current efforts aimed at geotourism planning and connecting volunteer resources. Many other possibilities exist for such trans-boundary cooperation. Along the border with Mexico there are also several existing collaborative efforts, but unfortunately, the representative from Mexico who was scheduled to share outcomes from these efforts via the International Perspectives session was unable to attend.

ENGAGING YOUTH FOR THE FUTURE OF WILDERNESS. As a reflection of concerns within the “Wilderness Movement,” conference planners committed to including discourse on leadership development for Wilderness advocacy and management and to ensure Wilderness remains accessible to everyone. “Millennials,” citizens roughly between age 18 and 30, are forming values influenced by new information regarding our relationship to the environment. In our effort to strengthen understanding of the relevance of Wilderness to young people, it is increasingly believed this well-defined segment is where Wilderness/conservation educators should focus their efforts.

CONFERENCE YOUTH PRESENTERS. Nine youth presenters were sponsored, in part or in full, to attend the conference. The two main youth-delivered presentations were Future Stewards and Listening to Youth. Both of these presentations were well attended, with approximately 40 people at each program, and audience members commended the speakers for the caliber and importance of their messages. The youths shared their personal stories about how Wilderness has impacted them. They also provided tangible advice for current managers on how to reach younger audiences and make Wilderness relevant to youth.

EMERGING AS LEADERS. A future when millennials are our Wilderness leaders is not far off. These emerging adults are unique, and are very different from the preceding “X” generation. Engaging millennials in conservation/Wilderness programming before they reach their mid-twenties may positively affect their environmentally-based decisions, as well as their every-day social and ethical choices, ultimately contributing to a more conscious general population and a more environmentally-supportive future society.

Academic (University of Montana’s Wilderness and Civilization Program) and immersion (Youth Conservation Corps) programs focus on 18-25 year olds, utilizing experiential learning, community interaction, and place-based education as tools to engage young people in nature, community, and to enhance their personal understanding of their future. Alaska Geographic and Yosemite National Park are two places that have successfully built a cadre of partners and local youth who are helping to reverse some of the harmful trends in relevancy of public lands and public engagement.

Lessons learned in Alaska and California are highly pertinent to the 2020 *Vision* statement for building relevancy. Successful pathways to leadership roles within the public lands arena are designed to create a ladder of experiences, regardless of the program type, and are meant to develop trust within communities through long-term commitment by the sponsoring organization. Partnerships between government agencies and non-governmental organizations are essential in creating these programs, and attracting and retaining more youth and culturally-diverse communities in Wilderness stewardship.

Civic Engagement Track Sessions

Young people are becoming strong advocates for responsible public lands management. At the conference, we heard evidence of this from Alaska youth engaged in changing perceptions of exclusivity of wildlands and seas. Messages they struggle to combat include: Wilderness is only for people seeking extreme solitude or risk; Wilderness is only for people who represent a very small segment of our country's rapidly changing demographics (a concept developed and promoted by an entitled class); and one must be well equipped with experience and expensive gear to venture into Wilderness.

CONCLUSION. The diversity evident in these sessions is a positive indication of the growth of relevancy of Wilderness to the American public. For the first time in the history of our nation's Wilderness struggle, American Indians, Alaska Natives, Hispanics, Asians, youth, veterans, diverse coalitions, urban minorities, and a broad range of non-governmental organizations came together in a national forum to talk, sometimes to criticize, but always to express feelings of hope and expectation of inclusivity of all people to share the many benefits and responsibilities associated with Wilderness stewardship.

Listed below are a few examples of Wilderness cultural-community outreach/cross-cultural activities that have either already been realized or are being seriously considered for implementation as a result of the discussion, presentations and information sharing facilitated by the Civic Engagement Track:

- Involve Tribes and cultural communities in Wilderness/public land strategic planning
- Conduct National Wilderness Cultural Communities/Youth Conference in 2016
- Establish National Wilderness Cultural Communities Advisory Council by spring 2016
- Increase the number of Wilderness Investigations Teacher Workshops in Native and culturally diverse communities in 2015 and 2016
- Expand and sustain Native and/or urban youth conservation corps programs: La Plazita Native American Youth Urban Corps (Albuquerque, NM) and Conservation Legacy's Native Youth Conservation Corps (Phoenix, AZ)
- Laddered Outdoor Leadership Programs: Yosemite Leadership Program (Merced, CA)
- Engage veterans in outdoor-based projects and activities: Rivers of Recovery (Eagan, MN), Not Forgotten Outreach (Taos, NM)
- Develop, implement, evaluate and sustain collaborative local agency, NGO, Tribal and cultural community outreach/Wilderness awareness programming

A strong strategic plan to continue stewardship of Wilderness into the future should contain broad efforts to understand diverse orientations to Wilderness, to facilitate realization of both visitation and non-use benefits of Wilderness to the American public, and to assure that Wilderness is for all people and all people can be for Wilderness.

“Wilderness is a necessity ... They will see what I meant in time. There must be places for human beings to satisfy their souls. Food and drink is not all. There is the spiritual. In some it is only a germ, of course, but the germ will groze.”

JOHN MUIR, American naturalist and co-founder of the Sierra Club