

# National Wildlife Federation

## Youth Programs

03

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# Meet the Researcher

Charmayne Planter



Hi, my name is Charmayne Planter. I am a dedicated Graduate research Student and an advocate for youth empowerment in the climate justice movement. Currently pursuing my master's degree in geography at the University of Georgia, my work focuses on fostering meaningful youth involvement in climate action and environmental policy. My research emphasizes developing strategies to engage young people, aged 13-26, in civic participation and professional opportunities related to sustainability, conservation, and environmental justice.

I have a strong foundation in environmental studies and geography, I have collaborated extensively with the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), where I have worked to strengthen youth programming and create pathways for young professionals to enter environmental fields. My contributions include designing innovative frameworks for youth engagement, improving internship programs, and mentoring emerging leaders to ensure a new generation of climate advocates is equipped to address today's pressing environmental challenges.

I am honored to have received several prestigious awards, including the National Conservation Young Leader Award from the National Wildlife Federation and the Master's and Osborne Fellowship Award. My work reflects my commitment to combining academic rigor with actionable outcomes and building bridges between communities, organizations, and young changemakers to advance environmental and climate justice.

SUPERVISED BY  
**Crystal Jennings**  
**Courtney Cochran**

# Statement of Purpose:

The **purpose** of this research is develop strategies to enhance youth engagement and participation in NWF’s youth programs and pre-professional internships, ensuring safe and effective planning throughout the following processes: hiring, management practices, employee development, monitoring work experience quality, networking, and retention.

**Scope:** By focusing on integrating young professionals into NWF programs, ensuring they leave with positive feedback, strong relationships with full-time NWF staff, and a positive perception of NWF programs catered to their demographic.

## Key Research Questions



**National Wildlife Federation**



**NWF:** “We are an organization that youth can turn to with their conservation interests!”



**Prospective Youth**

Is it NWFs Goal to be a leading Conservation Organization for youth development?

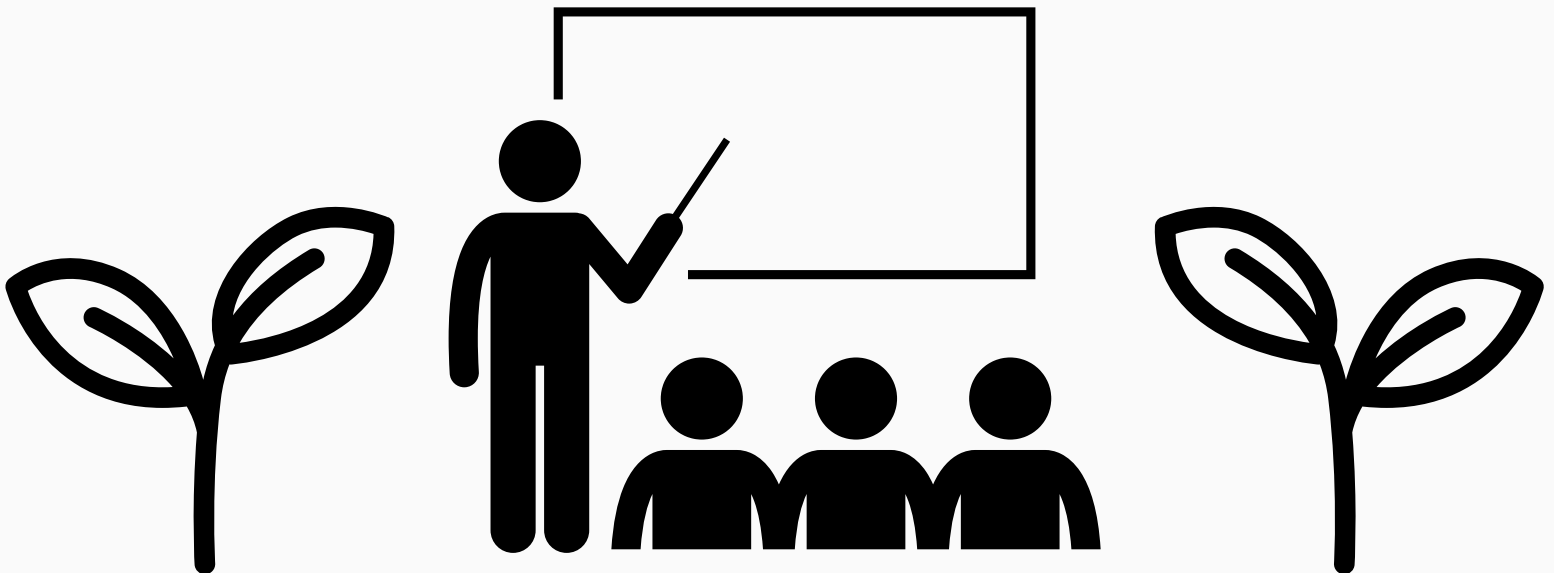


**Prospective Youth**

How can NWF expand their resources to meet the needs of the upcoming generation?



## THE TERM “ECO” “ALTERNATIVE CLASSROOM” “CLASS LEADERSHIP IN THE ENVIRONMENT”



The term eco is derived from the word “ecology”. Ecology is defined as: “The branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings.”

NWF Programs should be seen as classrooms. Where student knowledge of the environment, and their place is fostered and promoted.

**THIS IS HOW WE PRODUCE “ECOLEADERS.”**

# DEFINE YOUTH LEADERSHIP PROGRAM



**CRETF**  
CLIMATE & RESILIENCE  
EDUCATION TASK FORCE

As I draw from my own experience being a member of Earth Tomorrow and the impact that it has had on me. I am compelled to define the mission and the purpose of a youth program with the information that I have gathered. A Successful Youth Program is centered around empowering youth no matter the class or racial identity to see themselves as voices for their environment. To learn successful collaboration with members of their community and develop a deep sense of belonging, voice and inspiration from their own work that they do in collaboration with NWF.

As I think about my own trajectory I believe fostering these goals in programing strategies is important-- Youth Centered community development.

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Strategies and Interpretation  
of impact



# Geography of Programs

"Where did these programs originate"



What can we do to bring all these programs under one umbrella?

## C.R.E.F.T

CREFT (Climate Education and Resiliency Fellowship Team) is a cohort of high school students dedicated to expanding access to climate education in New York schools. This 20-week program offers participants the opportunity to learn about climate solutions and *green career pathways*, develop leadership and advocacy skills, and connect with like-minded students.

## R.I.S.C

The RiSC (Resilient Schools Consortium) program in New York City educates students about climate justice. The organization partners with ten NYC schools, the program includes initiatives like "Adopt-a-Shoreline" where students explore sea level rise and engage with their community. The program has expanded to other regions, including the U.S. Virgin Islands, New Jersey, Texas, and Puerto Rico, with plans for national replication and a focus on connecting students to *green career opportunities*.

## Eco-Leaders Online Community

- Geographic Connection
- Post-Program Career Opportunities
- Networking
- Mentorship Opportunities
- Continued Connection with NWF Staff
- Student Funding Opportunities
- Social Media Expansion
- Student Work Archive

## Climate Equity Collaborative

The Climate Equity Collaborative (CEC) is a public-private partnership focused on engaging youth and underserved communities in climate innovation and action. It emphasizes climate education, children's environmental health, and environmental justice. CEC also facilitates youth involvement through its *Youth Advisory Council*, which provides *stipends* and opportunities for engagement in climate-related initiatives.

## Earth Tomorrow

Earth Tomorrow is the National Wildlife Federation's environmental justice education program. The leadership development and environmental education program creates opportunities for youth in frontline communities, particularly *youth of color*, to *deepen understanding* of environmental issues and provide solutions to address environmental injustices.

# Website Analysis



## Core Purpose of the Website

The website's necessity, target audience, and desired goals and outcomes were discussed.

- The consensus was that the site should clearly communicate that Eco Leaders is designed for individuals who want to lead environmental initiatives, with access to NWF resources.

## Additional Considerations

Brand awareness should be increased through partnerships with campus sustainability initiatives and newsletters highlighting eco-leaders.

Website accessibility and modernity can be improved using platforms like Userworks or Wix.

Accredible can be explored to make Eco-Leader certifications more impactful and shareable.



http://

### Hennessy:

- The certification process should have multiple pathways and be highlighted as providing self-motivation, credibility, and incentives.
- The current online certification process needs to be redesigned for a cleaner, more user-friendly.
- Stronger foundational support, such as mentorship, should be integrated into the NWF eco-leader certification.
- The certification should provide resources to aid project implementation, such as connections with experts or professionals who can offer support.
- Social media, especially LinkedIn groups, should be utilized.
- The career center's focus should be clarified (NWF-specific or broader).
- Further opportunities for engagement should be provided.
- Networking webinars, like those in the Climate Equity Collaboration, were deemed valuable.
- Brand awareness should be increased by publicizing Eco-Leader work outside NWF and forming sustainable partnerships with institutions like colleges and local news outlets.
- The career center information should be updated and made more interactive and accessible, potentially using slideshows or other media.

### Zachary:

- Separate landing pages and portals for Eco-Leaders and visitors are needed to avoid convolution.
- The landing page should explain the program.
- Key areas for eco-leader growth and meeting consumer needs should be identified.
- A "Learn More" section should clearly detail Eco Leader offerings (certifications, project management skills).
- The general website/portal should gateway to program-specific resources.

### Charmayne:

- The certification requirements can allow for more individualized idea development, encouraging creativity instead of adherence to rigid structures.
- Leadership development resources like Paragon One should be integrated to provide education, track cohorts, and enhance mentorship.
- Eco-Leader concepts include community engagement, social impact, and people-centered leadership.
- A balance between education and engagement should be maintained to avoid overwhelming users with content.
- Social media presence should be expanded, including reposting content on different platforms.
- Brand awareness should be increased by publicizing Eco-Leader work outside NWF and forming sustainable partnerships with institutions like colleges.
- The career center information should be updated and made more interactive and accessible, potentially using slideshows or other media.
- Career information less than 5 years old should be avoided due to industry changes.

## Graduate Student Research Fellows Feedback

Zachary Z.

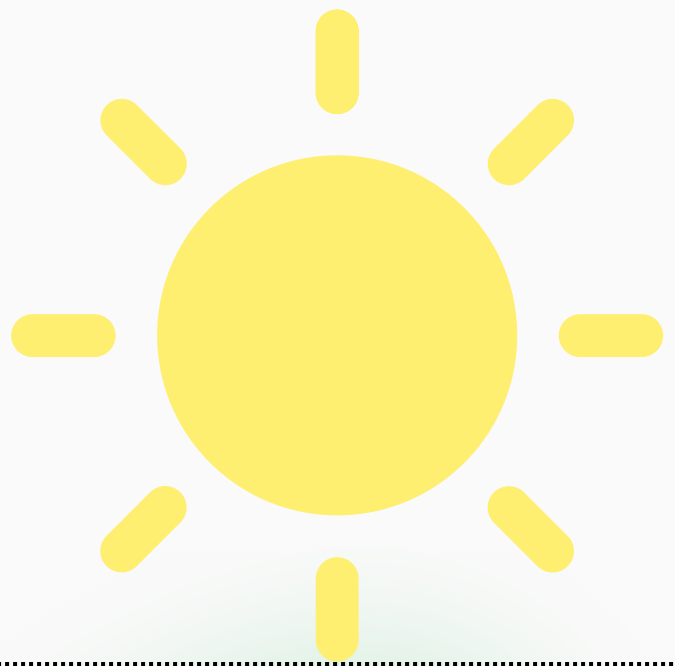
Charmayne P.

Hennessy M.





# Deep Dive Into Earth Tomorrow



## Case Study: Earth Tomorrow Summer Institute In Houston

**Quick Notes:** Earth Tomorrow Houston is a part of NWF's youth programs. The program running out of Houston is two years old and led by Michael Valdez. This report gives us a walkthrough of the risk management strategies and youth programming development framework based on contributions provided by Michael Valdez. The goal of meeting with Michael is to understand and spotlight practices in working with youth and young professional between the ages (14-25).

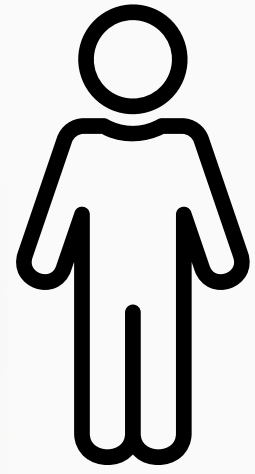


**EARTH  
TOMORROW**



**Michael Valdez's** approach to youth programming emphasizes the importance of risk management, program integrity, and meaningful engagement. By implementing the strategies outlined in this report, the National Wildlife Federation can create a safe, impactful, and enriching experience for youth participants.

# Finding the “perfect” Peer Mentor



“ As **program leader**- I observed **specific traits** when it came to the peer mentors- they wanna have all the answers- but there are a lot of ways people lead right and there are a lot of ways people can do it wrong- **training programs are important because it offers these teaching moments and allows for students to feel empowered to ask question and encourage rational decision making**— it’s important for NWF to be a safe enough resource for our peer mentors so that they can feel empowered enough to lead” - **MV**

**Peer mentors** are some of the most essential parts to running an effective summer institute. Peer mentors are typically former participants of Earth Tomorrow who have an interest in returning to the program to help guide and influence engagement to rising generation of earth tomorrow stewards.

**Craft interview questions to determine how program can meet their needs- rather than hiring interested candidates**

## Interview Questions Used by Michael Valdez:

- Why do you think you are a good fit for this program?
- What are your strengths, and what areas can you work on?
- What are you hoping to get out of this internship?
- Identifying Strengths: Look for candidates with leadership potential, such as those who are extroverts, thinkers, and doers.

**Seek individuals** who are motivated and have a genuine interest in environmental conservation. Figure out the best ways that Earth Tomorrow can benefit their interests throughout the week long experience.



# Next Steps..

## Standardized Peer Mentor Training



### Work Plan Development:

- Outline **clear program expectations and goals.**
- Schedule regular training sessions to prepare participants, including training days before the internship begins.
- Facilitate participation through **structured activities** and scenarios to practice skills

**Michael Valdez** indicated that he conducted comprehensive 2-day training sessions prior to the start of the program with the hired peer mentors—where they went over crisis scenarios and allowed a safe space to ask questions.

- *During these sessions, they reviewed scenarios and other key elements of leadership development relevant to the programs.*

Michael Valdez also mentioned **developing risk management guidelines and handbooks** to provide clear instructions on maintaining a safe environment.

### Training Implementation:

- Conduct training on Fridays and Saturdays before the internship starts.
- Use scenarios to simulate real-world situations and teach problem-solving and decision-making skills.
- Emphasize the importance of adaptability and continuous learning.
- Establish clear policies and procedures for reporting and handling incidents of misconduct.

*By following these steps, the National Wildlife Federation can enhance its youth programming, ensuring safety, engagement, and meaningful impact.*

The **Houston ET Summer Institute** had 2 days of training prior to the actual summer program. This provides feedback and opportunities for candidates to develop necessary skills to be leaders in the program.

**This is good because training sessions can help candidates overcome weaknesses and enhance their strengths and gain familiarity around program expectations.**

**Handbooks and Paper** copies of references such as day to day events, group chats and other resources to mitigate safety were developed during this training.

- 01 **Begin the interview and selection process for peer mentors at least 3-4 months in advance.**

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- 02 **Develop a detailed training Guide that can be applicable to all Earth Tomorrow Programs .**

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- 03 **Plan and organize initial training and orientation sessions**

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- 04 **Set up systems for ongoing monitoring, feedback, and program evaluation.**

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- 05 **Allow opportunities for peer mentors to chart their own growth**

# Deep Dive Into Earth Tomorrow

Chart Your Journey

PERFORMANCE	SELF EVALUATION	PEER EVALUATION
Can lead students		
Solve problems on their own		
Arrives on time to programs		
Can demonstrate high level engagement with programs		



## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES DURING THIS EVALUATION

Do you have any concerns about your career?	
What do you need to accomplish your goals?	
Do you have any long-term goals in your career?	
How can we help you achieve these goals?	

**DATE OF REVIEW :**

**NEXT REVIEW DATE :**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Employee Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Reviewer

# Deep Dive Into Earth Tomorrow

Performance  
Evaluation

Employee Name : -----

Supervisor : -----

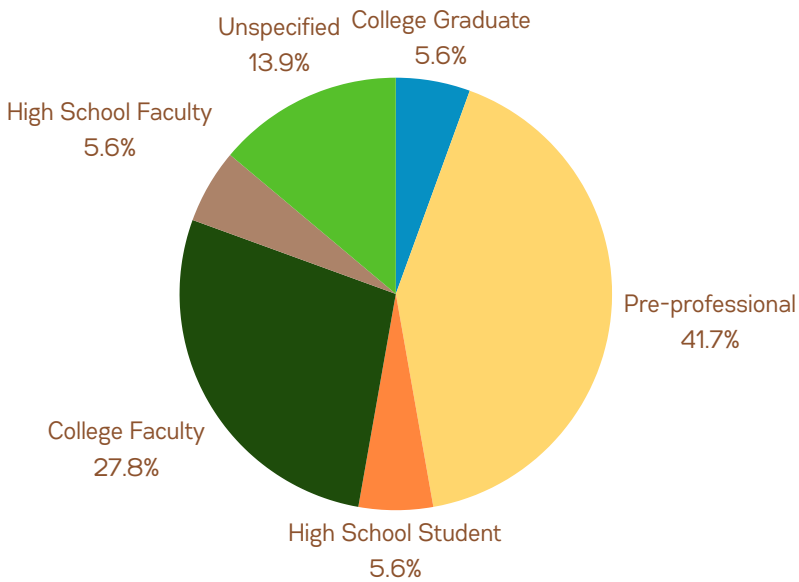
Job Title : Peer Mentor

Period : Summer 2025

PERFORMANCE	SELF EVALUATION	SUPERVISOR EVALUATION
Show strong initiative		
Works well with others ingroup-based projects		
Takes instructions and follows leaders well		
Shows leadership skills		
Stays focused on tasks at hand		
Engagement with students and programming		
Has good communication with students		
Has good communication with supervisors		
Willing to improve upon critique		

# NWF 2022 SURVEY ANALYSIS

Out of **39** Survey Participants, this is the primary demographic of those who participated in the Eco-leader quality update survey



The **National Wildlife Federation's** (NWF) EcoLeaders program aims to serve as a resource for individuals aged **13-26** who are interested in environmental conservation and justice. The program provides a platform for **education, networking, and certification** in various environmental conservation issues. The goal of this analysis is to understand how NWF can restructure the EcoLeaders program to better meet the needs of its participants and enhance engagement across the target demographic.

## Peak Engagement Demographic:

Predominant Respondents: Most survey participants identified as early-career professionals, with many having already completed college and either working in or looking for work in environmental conservation.

## Outreach Channel Data

Respondents learned about the EcoLeaders program through several key channels:



- Professors
- NAAEE Conference (North American Association for Environmental Education)
- Emails from affiliated schools
- Online newsletters
- College connections
- NWF internal staff and programs

**78%** of respondents indicated that the ability to **interact** with other EcoLeaders is important. This highlights a need for stronger **networking opportunities** within the forum/ program.



- 01 • **54%** of respondents indicated that they had earned the **EcoLeader Project Certification**, making it the **most earned badge** within the surveyed data pool. This suggests that the certification is a key draw for participants and should continue to be a focus area for program engagement-- perhaps looking into accessibilities and qualifications and incentives



## Leadership Development and Resources

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30% of Survey Participants found Eco-topic pages on the Ecoleaders Website to be the most beneficial aspect of the program.

Key topics Listed included:

# ECOTOPICS

Climate Adaptation	<b>1</b>
Education	<b>2</b>
Energy	<b>3</b>
Food	<b>4</b>
Habitat	<b>5</b>
Outdoor Leadership	<b>6</b>
Recreation	<b>7</b>
Policy	<b>8</b>
Food	<b>9</b>
Transportation	<b>10</b>
Justice	<b>11</b>
Buidlings	<b>12</b>

• Numbers are listed in no particular order



## Next Steps

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# Recommendations for **ECOLEADER** Restructuring the Program: Based on 2022 Survey

Based on the Feedback provided from the 2022 survey here is A guide to focus on what key areas the Eco-leaders program survey participants as key areas of interests and offering modern insight as to how the existing program can be enhanced.

01

### **Broaden Outreach to Younger Demographics:**

While the program effectively serves engages early-career professionals, further efforts should be made to attract younger individuals (13-18 years old) through high school outreach, social media campaigns, and affiliate partnerships with organizations, along with engagement with faculty colleges & universities

02

### **Enhance Networking Opportunities:**

The high demand for interaction with other Ecoleader participants remains evident, consider developing specific programs (e.g., mentorship, networking events, forums) that facilitate connections among EcoLeaders both in-person and virtually. This can be achieved through workshops, webinars, and interactive online forums.

03

### **Eco-Leader Certification**

As the EcoLeader Project Certification is highly valued, the program should continue to promote this feature while potentially adding new types of certifications or badges that cater to different areas of interest within environmental conservation.

04

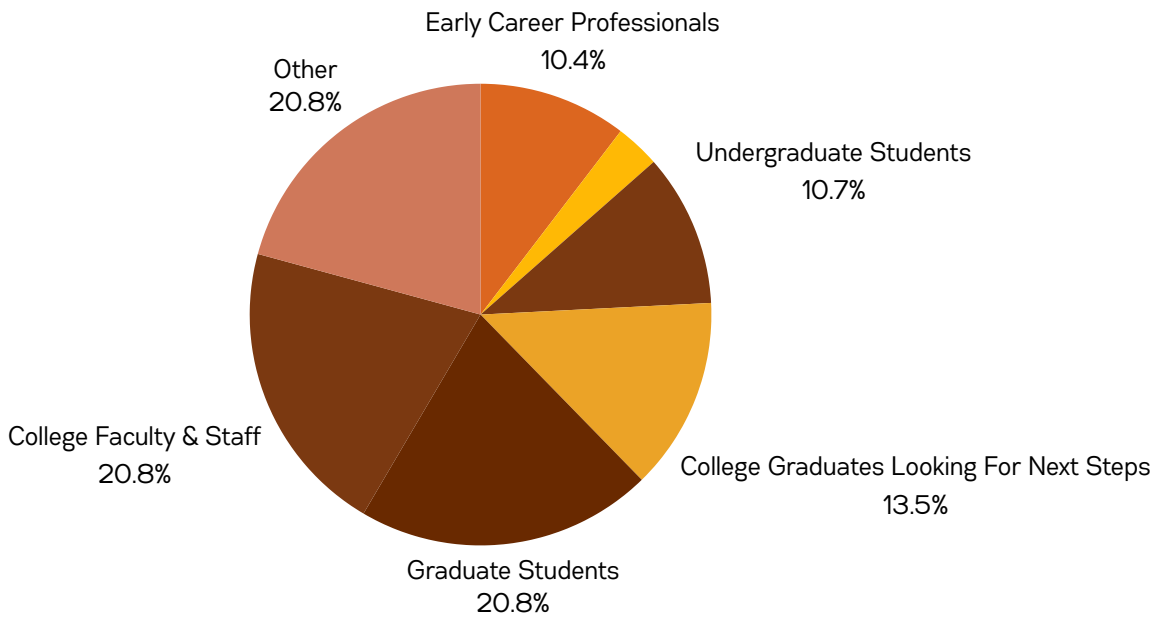
### **ECO-TOPICS**

Interactive Blog Platform: Transform the EcoLeaders platform into a more interactive blog that allows participants to engage with topics in real time, share their experiences, and connect with other EcoLeaders. This would help improve the sense of community and engagement, which many respondents indicated was important.

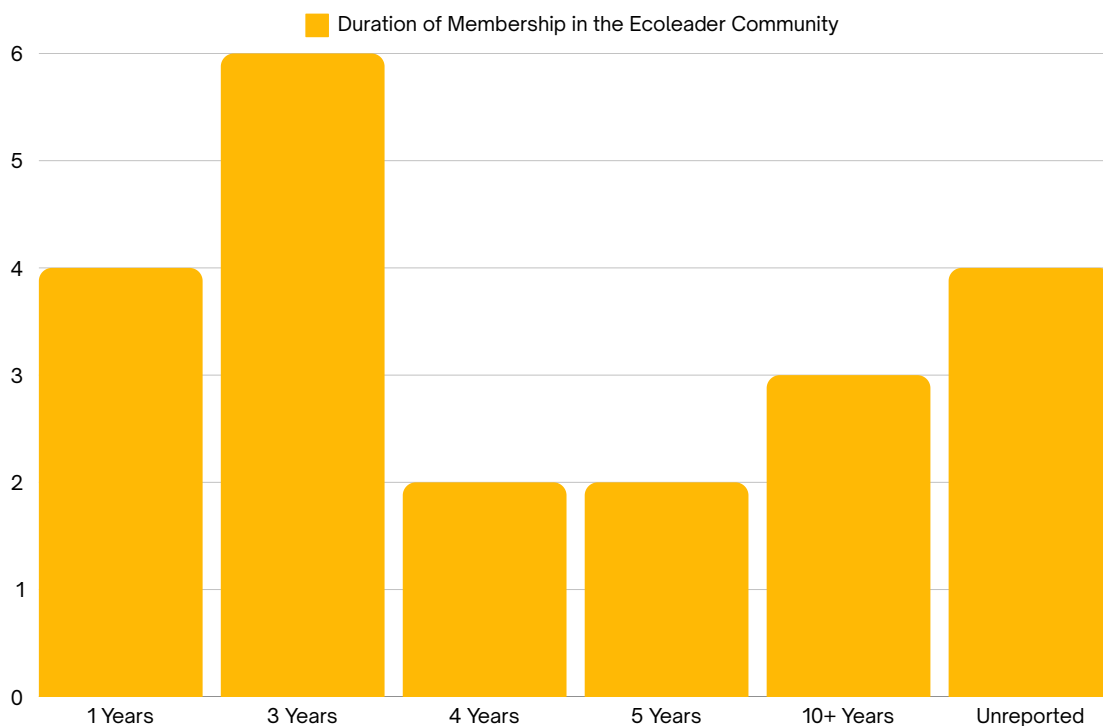
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# NWF ECOLEADER 2024 SURVEY

In our 2024 survey, here is our career position breakdown of survey participants.



## How long have you been a member of the EcoLeaders Community?



The largest group of respondents (6) have been members for 3 years, making up a significant portion of the survey participants.

A moderate number of respondents (4) have been members for 1 year, suggesting a balance between newer and more experienced members.

3 respondents have been in the community for 10 years or more, indicating a smaller but highly experienced and long-term group.

A smaller group of members (2) have reported being in the community for 4 years and 5 years each.

4 respondents did not report their length of membership.

# Jessian Choy



**Jessian Choy** became involved with the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) Eco-Leaders program around the year 2000 to secure funding for a student-led project to green their campus. At the time, NWF was the only organization providing funding for such initiatives. Jessian discovered the program through the student services office at their college, UC Santa Cruz.

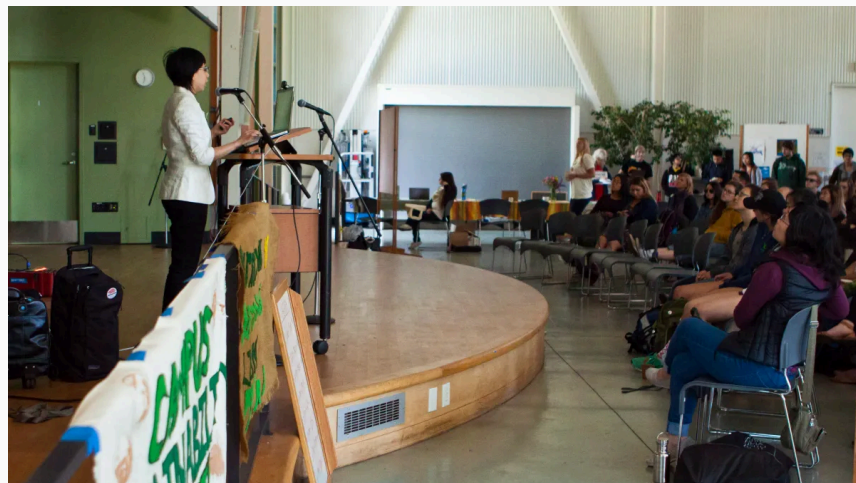
While studying legal studies at UC Santa Cruz, Jessian took courses across various disciplines, which gave them insights into how different fields use distinct terminologies and approaches, often failing to communicate effectively with one another. This interdisciplinary exposure influenced their perspective on collaboration and advocacy. Growing up, Jessian was deeply interested in environmentalism and felt frustrated by the inconsistency between what adults preached about sustainability and their actual practices.

During college, Jessian advocated for improved public transit options but faced significant challenges in creating change. In response, they established a hub for students to collectively advocate for sustainable initiatives on campus. With funding from NWF, they were able to connect with staff and other fellows, despite not focusing on a single-issue project. This collaboration allowed them to advance their vision for a greener campus.

Jessian proposed broadening the Eco-Leaders program's purchasing page to include a wider range of sustainable products beyond paper. They also recommended connecting students with organizations like the Sustainable Purchasing Leadership Council (SPLC) to promote greener campus practices.

Jessian highlighted the significance of creating opportunities for students to connect with one another and with mentors. They suggested hosting retreats for young participants in the program to build stronger connections and foster collaboration.

Filling Gaps for College Students: Jessian noted that the program should focus on addressing the unique challenges faced by college students, providing a space for them to ask questions, learn, and advocate effectively.



**Recommendations for NWF Eco-Leaders Program**  
Jessian emphasized the importance of expanding the program's resources and fostering community among participants. Specific suggestions included:

# Jessian Choy

Jessian's career journey has evolved from an initial focus on working in government to their current role as a freelance journalist for Sierra Magazine. While they feel they can make a bigger impact in their current work, they noted that freelance journalism comes with financial challenges, earning less than other career paths. Jessian believes it is crucial to address pay inequity within environmental organizations and advocate for fair compensation for professionals in the field.

Jessian Choy's involvement with the NWF Eco-Leaders program highlights the program's value in supporting student-led sustainability initiatives and building a community of environmentally conscious advocates. Their experiences and recommendations underscore the importance of expanding resources, fostering mentorship, and addressing systemic issues such as pay inequity in the environmental sector. Jessian's reflections provide valuable insights for the continued growth and impact of the Eco-Leaders program.



**ECOLEADER  
Strong!**

## *Where is She Now?*





# Comparative Analysis of Programs



# Resilience and Schools ——— Coordinator RISC- Houston

**Kate Unger** serves as the *Resilience and Schools Coordinator* for the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) in **Houston, Texas**. Her role was established to foster relationships with schools in the Greater Houston community and to oversee grant-funded programs, including the RISC (Resilient Infrastructure and Sustainability for Communities) program. The RISC program focuses on climate resilience, green infrastructure, and green careers, aiming to engage high school students in these critical areas.

## **Program Overview:**

The RISC program operates as a long-term, relationship-driven initiative, targeting high schools and select middle schools. Every two years, new schools are brought into the program through an application and acceptance process. The program's success relies on building meaningful connections with teachers and students, creating a supportive and impactful educational environment.

To measure the program's effectiveness, Unger employs a range of evaluation tools, including pre- and post-surveys for students and teachers, midyear reports, and field experience evaluations. These assessments provide valuable insights into the program's impact on participants and inform areas for improvement.



# Resilience and Schools

## Houston

Through the program, students gain exposure to green careers by interacting with professionals in the field. This hands-on approach helps students understand the practical applications of climate resilience and green infrastructure while inspiring them to consider careers in these fields.

The RISC program is funded through a combination of local family foundations, statewide funders, and government organizations. This diverse funding base ensures the program's sustainability and enables it to provide valuable resources to participating schools and students.

### Challenges:

One of the primary challenges faced by the program is teacher retention, which is often affected by district-level issues. This challenge underscores the importance of maintaining strong relationships with participating educators and adapting to changes in school staffing.

Despite these challenges, the program's relational and long-term approach ensures that it remains impactful. By fostering deep connections with schools and prioritizing experiential learning, the RISC program continues to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to address climate resilience and pursue green careers.



### Where to go from here?

Kate Unger's leadership and the RISC program exemplify the National Wildlife Federation's commitment to empowering young people and building sustainable communities. By focusing on relationship-building, experiential learning, and green career exploration, the program has become a vital resource for schools in the Greater Houston area. With continued support and adaptation, the RISC program is poised to inspire the next generation of environmental leaders.



### Community Outreach and Engagement:

Unger leverages Houston's environmental education network to identify schools interested in joining the program. This network-driven approach has proven more effective than relying on social media outreach, which is limited by staffing constraints. The program's focus on outreach allows it to maintain a broad reach, while a smaller subset of activities emphasizes leadership development for participating students.



# Climate Equity Collab.

David and Marley are currently NWF staff members who gave me insight into their operation and planning for Climate Equity Collab.

*Marley Hauser.*



**Climate Equity Collaborative (CEC)**, aims to integrate climate equity across sectors, including tech, education, and community connections. The Youth Advisory Council, comprising college students and early career professionals, developed CEC's bylaws and governance. Key initiatives include providing stipends, professional development opportunities, and amplifying youth voices through LinkedIn and the NWF blog.

- Challenges include financial barriers and the need for inclusive decision-making. Future plans include leveraging NWF's networks and resources to support youth career development and climate equity initiatives.

## Action Items:

- Invite Youth Advisory Council members to the New York City Bike Week speaking opportunity.
- Remind Youth Advisory Council members that they can receive letters of recommendation from CEC/NWF.
- Explore ways to leverage NWF's existing networks and partnerships to support CEC's youth initiatives and programming.



David Cosar

# Climate Resilience Education Task Force (CRETf)



**Emily Fano** plays a central role in driving the policy advocacy work, community engagement, and overall management of the CRETf initiative.

As she serves as a representative and advocate for the CRETf, negotiating with the state education department and building coalitions with other climate and education groups.

**Climate Resilience Education Task Force (CRETf)** in New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and Texas. The RSCP focuses on policy changes, while CRETf emphasizes climate education. **Weekly policy committee meetings** and quarterly public events are held. The program targets high school students and college-age individuals, offering stipends, certificates, and leadership roles. Outreach methods include newsletters, social media, and e-blasts. The program aims to integrate **climate education into state standards** and has achieved significant policy wins, including inclusion in the climate act. Funding comes from grants, and partnerships with organizations like WE ACT and New York Renews are crucial.



## Action Items

- Cross promote EcoLeaders conferences and other NWF programs to CRETf students— to incorporate unity among programs
- Explore partnering with organizations like SEI and Work On Climate to help develop career pathways for CRETf students.
- Consider ways to better track CRETf alumni and bring them together, such as establishing an alumni structure.

## ***Findings and Future expectations***

Improving NWF Youth Programs to better engage and connect with the next generation of ecoleaders requires a combination of increasing accessibility, mentorship, community-building, and tracking real-world impact opportunities/ engagement.

**Alumni Relations:** Alumni should have opportunities to continue to affiliate themselves with NWF's goals and mission. The expectation is that they are safe bridges to communicate ideas and serve as accesible liaisons for environmental engagement.

**Where are they now updates:** Programs/ Eco-leaders can increase awareness and community by showcasing EcoLeader projects weekly on Instagram, LinkedIn..Host Instagram takeovers featuring EcoLeaders in the field.

**Expand Paid Fellowship & Internship Opportunities:** Partner with local NGOs, Universities, and government agencies to offer Job-Placement or paid fellowships for EcoLeaders. We can also look into developing an internal NWF EcoLeaders Fund to support unpaid placements, scholarships, independent projects.

**Connect EcoLeaders to Real-World Advocacy Work:** Offer regional case studies on what youth care about in their communities and highlight BIPOC contributions, and offer frontline community leadership opprounties to engage with elected officials, policy or additional ways to channel youth empowerment.

**Develop an EcoLeaders Youth Advisory Board:** Recruit youth representatives from different youth programs to provide continuous feedback loop on programming strategies.Give alumni a decision-making role in shaping the program's priorities.

**Thank you!**

[Link to Research Information](#)

**Methods used:** Otter Transcribing Software, ZOOM, Canva Template, Gemini on Google, Google drive was used to store and share information,

