

National Wildlife Federation Fellowship Report: An Analysis of External Youth  
Environmental Programs

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## **Introduction**

As an individual who has participated and is currently involved with environmental youth programming, I have experienced both the positives and the negatives of youth environmental programming. The intention behind this research is to continue strengthening youth's involvement and voices in the environmental space. More than anything, the climate crisis has proven to be a wicked problem and continues to impact the world intergenerationally. Youth voices are nonetheless a priority in any environmental space, program, or field.

My exposure to NWF was through the Youth Advisory Council of the Climate Equity Collaborative (CEC), a public-private partnership engaged in climate action. The CEC youth council was a strong demonstration of NWF's dedication to youth and working towards just climate solutions. The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has been historically and currently involved in connecting kids and nature. According to NWF's website, a current goal for youth is to "...get 21 million American children, teens, and young adults out of their indoor habitat and into the great outdoors...toward a future in which all kids spend time outside each day, creating a generation of happier, healthier children with more awareness and connection to the natural world." Through NWF, it has been able to conduct its youth-centered work through the Eco-Schools USA, Garden for Wildlife, Earth Tomorrow, EcoLeaders/EcoCareers, Trees for Wildlife, Early Childhood Health Outdoors, and the Climate Equity Collaborative - Youth Advisory Board. Therefore, it felt necessary to support NWF's efforts in their youth programming and involvement, and better understand what are current gaps in other, external youth environmental programming.

## **Research Structure**

During my time on the Youth Advisory Council for the Climate Equity Collaborative there was a general agreement among all youths that there were tremendous barriers for youth to get involved, or gain environmental work and/or internship opportunities. This provided insight that there is a need to better understand the current struggles and challenges that youth are facing in environmental programs, whether these programs are centered on profession or personal development.

As NWF is leading the efforts of these youth-centered programs, it felt beneficial to conduct research on external (non-NWF) environmental programs that are youth centered. By doing so, the finding could identify current gaps and challenges that youth are directly experiencing in the existing environmental programs. By identifying these challenges, NWF can adjust current internal youth programming to better suit the needs and experiences of youth across the nation.

I decided on conducting qualitative research on external environmental programs through semi-structured interviews of participating youths. For the sake of legality and safety, “youth” in this research are individuals 18 years or older, but are not past the age of 25. I decided on semi-structured interviews because it would provide the interview to still have the structure of an opening script and a set of questions, but with flexibility to have a natural conversation flow among the youths. While the research was intended solely for external youth programming, NWF has regional offices and programs, which provided the opportunity to interview other individuals who may not be youth, but are directly involved or program manage youth programming. Therefore, I also conducted internal interviews of regional NWF individuals that are directly involved or leading youth programming in any manner. All interviews were

conducted either in-person or on the Zoom platform. With my involvement in youth-environmental spaces, I felt that I could easily identify colleagues and acquaintances that are currently participating in environmental programs, and who I have already built trust and a connection with. Therefore, all that were interviewed were youths who I directly have known prior and/or have worked with in the past in some sort of youth-centered environmental programming. Unfortunately, the interviews conducted with regional NWF individuals were individuals that I did not have a prior relationship with. Therefore, I made sure that the set of questions provided for interviewees were written to slowly build up trust and a sense of connection with myself, serving as an interviewer (Figure 1). Ultimately, as a researcher, I want all participants to feel comfortable and safe enough to speak about their experiences. All interviews were given the same opening script regarding data collecting, recording, and transcribing of the interview. The interviews took on average 30 minutes to complete. All identifying information of interviewees were omitted from the interview for ethical concerns regarding privacy of the participants in this study.

While I anticipated conducting a minimum of 10 interviews, I ended up only being able to interview a total of 4 individuals. With 3 being youth directly participating or leading a youth-centered program and 1 regional NWF individual that has surpassed the youth age range, but directly manages a youth conservation program. Nonetheless, I was able to interview a variety of youths from diverse youth programming, such as youth involved with environmental fellowships, climate activists groups, and youth educators managing youth surfing programming. From these interviews, I was able to find similarity of challenges and barriers that youth are facing in the environmental space and were coded under the same theme. From these

insights, I was able to identify 3 recommendations to offer up to NWF for future development of youth programming and potential opportunities to improve current youth programming.

### **Figure 1. Interview Script and Protocol**

#### Interview Protocol

##### **Opening Script:**

Thank you for meeting with me today! The purpose of this interview is to get a better understanding regarding external youth centered environmental programming. As a participant in this study, I consider you to be an expert on this and want to know about your experiences and thoughts regarding the questions I'm going to ask.

I will be recording this interview via Zoom meetings. After our interview is over, I will make a transcript of what you said, but I will replace your name, as well as those of anyone you mention and any places you mention, so that nothing can be traced back to you. I will be the only one that has access to this data, and will keep it locked away and safe until it is time to erase the data entirely.

If you want to stop participating in this interview or not respond to any specific questions for any reason, you may do so without fearing my judgment or disappointment. Before we begin, do you have any questions?

[Interviewer will answer any questions until the participant is satisfied and ready to begin.]

This interview is expected to take 30 minutes. Are you willing to start the interview and be recorded right now? [Wait for responses, and begin recording]. Okay, I've started recording. As a reminder, this research will only be for internal use for National Wildlife Federation program development purposes. This recording will only be used to review and transcribe interview responses clearly. Can you affirm, for the recording, that you understand and assent to having your words recorded in this interview? [wait for response] Thank you! Let's begin with the first question.

##### **Interview Questions:**

<b>Question:</b>	<b>Rationale / Purpose of Question</b>	<b>Probes / Follow-up Question</b>
Can you describe to me your focus within the environmental space?	Ice-breaker; Building rapport for interview	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You mentioned [prior statement]. Can you talk more about that?</li> <li>2. I was interested in what you said about [prior statement]. Can you tell me a specific story from your experience that illustrates this point?</li> <li>3. How so/In what way?</li> <li>4. What do you mean?</li> <li>5. Can you clarify what you meant by that?</li> <li>6. So, if I can paraphrase what you just said I'm hearing that [summary of points]. Is that correct?</li> </ol>
What led you to be interested in this line of work?	Ice-breaker; Building rapport for interview	
Can you tell me what youth based program you are a part of and what led you to get involved with the organization?	Understand their reason "why" to being involved with the youth programming	
What is the main mission of this program and does it support youth related issues ?	To understand what type of program/organization is engaging with youth and getting them involved.	
Why do you think your organization/program is important to youth?	To add more depth into the question above, and to why youth want to be involved with the program/organization.	
What type of work do you enjoy doing within this organization/program?	To understand what youth enjoy the most within their program/organization	
In what ways do you feel heard or best supported by the program/organization?	To understand how the organization/program is best supporting youth	
What are some programming challenges or difficulties that you face when it comes to youth-based work?	To understand what issues and gaps occur in other youth programming/organization	
What are some ways that could better advance efforts and youth engagement	To understand from a youth perspective of what should be implemented within these	

within your program?	programs/organizations. To learn about the opportunity of growth and development for this space.	
As a youth, what makes you feel best supported?	Core purpose of the interview, trying to better understand how to implement this answer into youth programming.	
<p><b>Closing Script:</b></p> <p>That concludes our time. Thank you for your participation in this interview! The results will help us to understand more about [].</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me before you go?</p> <p>Thank you so very much. This research would not be possible without you!</p>		

**Interviewees**

**Figure 2. Table of General Information of the Interviewees**

*Interviewee #	Environmental Organization	Current Role	Youth or NWF Affiliate ?
Interviewee #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Black Girl Environmentalist: Hazel M. Johnson Fellowship</li> <li>- Hip Hop Caucus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2024 Hazel M. Johnson Fellow</li> <li>- Hip Hop Caucus Storytelling Fellow</li> </ul>	Youth
Interviewee #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Un Mar de Colores</li> <li>- Wildland Studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youth Development Specialist</li> </ul>	Youth

Interviewee #3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gulf of Mexico Youth Climate Summit</li> <li>- Contracted Work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youth Advisory Congress Member</li> <li>- Youth Environmental Educator</li> </ul>	Youth
Interviewee #4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conservation Leadership Corps program (Minnesota-based)</li> <li>- Minnesota Conservation Federation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Executive Director</li> </ul>	NWF Affiliate

\* Interviewees' numbers are based on chronological order of when the interview was conducted.

### Methods for Analysis

To analyze the interview data, I transcribed all the recorded interview responses and then coded the responses based on common themes found among the interviews. These themes provided insight on the struggles and challenges youth are facing in these external environmental programs, but they also demonstrate some of the strengths and success that these programs have offered them. I found the following themes among the interviews:

- Inclusivity
- Identity
- Additional Funding / Support
- Burnout
- Community
- Empowerment

The following sections below will explain what each theme covers and direct quotations from youth participants of this study.



<p><b>Inclusivity:</b></p> <p>Across each interview, the feeling of being safe to express oneself, to feel valued, and respected was important for all participants. Therefore, they let me know that these environmental programs or efforts that they participated in allowed them to feel a sense of inclusiveness among other peers, colleagues, and supervisors.</p>	<p>“I felt like i could be myself and I could tell I was respected and they wanted to hear me out fully”</p>
	<p>“I feel like the founder and team of the organization I work with are diverse and treat each other with kindness. I feel valued and not underestimated.”</p>
	<p>“I felt like I could be myself and I could tell I was respected and they wanted to hear me out fully. these people do want to help me make an impact”</p>
	<p>“It is really excited to involve them in the legislative process...anyone can do it...I change the program in response to the student’s interest”</p>

<p><b>Community:</b></p>	<p>“We also had a retreat and it gave us a chance to connect with nature and it helped me to understand the value of community among the</p>
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	other fellows”
	“I want to be that bridge for youth that may nor or do not have access to these experiences or connections with nature”
	“ I like to stay invested in these kids..”
	“...It was a great program if you are serious about environmental science and I still go visit my teachers who are prepping teams for this contest and I love to go back to provide them with information for the contest and give them insight on college or what college could look like.”
	“ I was automatically surrounded by people with interest and who care about the same mission that GOMYCS, and that were all community driven...”
	“I want to be that bridge for youth that may nor or do not have access to these experiences or connections with nature.”
	“Personally, I would say I feel best supported

	<p>and you are in these organizations and you have support from your colleagues and you truthfully in it for your love of education and it feels like a safe-environment.”</p>
	<p>“I got involved in this work because of Inequities in my own community in terms of environmental access...”</p>

<p><b>Identity:</b></p>	<p>“My heritage is Nigerian American and understanding the exploitation of oil and resiliency of my people, I understand we can bring about solutions on the climate sector, so this my interest to be part of this program and line of work is rooted in wanting people of all backgrounds to be involved in this space”</p>
	<p>“ I just felt that this program aligned with my experiences, and it felt closer to home because I was working with youths with similar backgrounds who do not have access to these spaces so this work is meaningful for me. The</p>

	<p>mission of this program aligned with my identity.”</p>
	<p>“Each person has a distinct relationship with the environment and the environment has shaped their identity. It feels different from colonized environmental spaces.”</p>

<p><b>Additional Funding / Support:</b></p>	<p>“Never anything wrong with more funding — give black women more funding . Also, these organizations need more attention and awareness. Hence why these pipelines need to exist!”</p>
	<p>“I feel that a lot of times, there is a lack of consistency and everyone was excited in the beginning but the momentum is typically lost through time. The intention is there in youth based work but typically there is lack of support in these youth structures”</p>
	<p>“What is lacking is to be able to bring more material and activities and more hands-on</p>

	<p>work that can get kids outdoors. For example, to show them fur or skulls or plants/leaves , bringing nature who are not able to be outside with nature and connect through that. If there is funding available, these programs should switch to providing these items and it will help engage more with the kids.”</p>
	<p>“A lot of these roles are unfortunately not paid, so if I could get a stipend or even free lunch — that is a huge help. I am also commuting a lot, so any amount of donations is really helpful so I can keep doing this work.”</p>
	<p>“Fear, there is a lot of fear in the beginning and lack of understanding or support from outsiders.”</p>
	<p>“It would be amazing if this program could have a broader geographical reach, being able to serve more communities and more peer mentorships.”</p>
	<p>“...So having emotional support trainings in</p>

	relation to having climate resilience in this time period would be beneficial”
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**Burnout:**

	“For me, having open space to communicate when I'm burning out and can get my needs supported. That communication can go both ways in these youth programs.”
	“It was important because I didn't realize how isolated I felt in the climate sector and I could feel the burnout of not seeing people of color...”
	“ I try to give presentations about wildlife but since these schools are stuck in a strict curriculum and I cannot give these presentations till after the testing is over. It is a missed opportunity because you can expose these kids early on and share that there is a future in this space, and it limits these options.”

	<p>“...having mental support groups for the exhaustion of fighting or when I feel hopeless in this line work. There have been times where students break down and I at times feel that I cannot properly serve these youths when I also feel down or sad about the same things”</p>
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<p><b>Empowerment:</b></p>	<p>“...We created a social media series on environmental issues that affect our voting system. We produced it, edited, and researched it — completely our own and ran by us. It felt powerful to run it.”</p>
	<p>“This was a fellowship run by gen-z for gen-z...”</p>
	<p>“I am invested in this type of work because without the work I am doing now, I would not be invested in this work...I went to talk to the scientist about my interest and she allowed me to have a private tour of the rehabilitation hospital for turtles. I realized that this is what</p>

	I wanted to do with the rest of my life”
	“When I see the passion and interest of these children, that is the highlight.”
	“The main mission of this program is to empower underserved youth of color who have not had historical access to these spaces and aligns with what I want to do in this world.”
	“...decolonized space for students to create their own stories and relationships with nature.”

### Recommendations for NWF:

#### 1. More resource, but focus on addressing the emotional burden and stress youths are facing

Among all programs, it is demonstrated that youth can benefit from *more*. However this “more” does not just mean monetary support. While various interviewees have spoken on the need of additional staff support and resources for within their programs, there was a clear demonstration of youth burnout from the heaviness of doing any sort of environmental work. Various interviewees mentioned the need of additional mental support resources could mean a difference for their well-being and participation in their programs. While it is obvious that more funding



and support is needed within youth programming, I think the strongest and most beneficial support can be provided in the emotional and mental support. I believe that there are avenues, regardless of what the youth programming is focused on, that can implement tools or opportunities to relieve the emotional stress and burnout that has been significant among youth involved in environmental spaces. Some examples would be ecotherapy implementation for programs focused on outdoor exposure to youth, climate anxiety training, and even subscriptions to meditation apps such as Calm. There are still a lot of unknowns regarding climate and eco anxiety, but hopefully NWF tries to maintain updated on this research and implement possible solutions to alleviate the emotional burnout and stress so many youths are experiencing.

## **2. Reevaluate youth programming after each cycle and prioritize youth as experts**

It was evident that during the interview phase of my research, all my interviewees were eager to talk about their work and what they hope to achieve through their efforts. I had 2 individuals who work directly with younger youth (18 years or younger), who shared that they feel highly attached to their work and kids as they come from similar backgrounds and experiences. They highlighted that because of this, they have been able to tailor their programming to be beneficial for the youth that they are serving. While it may seem intuitive, youth involved or leading youth programming have become experts in their work. Therefore, it is almost necessary that if NWF chooses to improve their youth programming, I think it would be beneficial to have previous participants to serve as experts at the end of each program cycle to identify specific strengths and weaknesses of the program. At the end of the day, youth know themselves best and can provide the necessary insights and recommendations to make a program successful.

**3. Create indicators of success for NWF's youth programming and build a cohesive guide for all NWF youth programming**

While I worked with youth that participate in external (non-NWF) environmental programming, I found various common themes among my interviewees, who all had varying experiences across different programs compared to one another. Even though programs varied from fellowships to environmental education programs, it demonstrated common goals and struggle. For example, emotional burnout was common, but the necessary need of building a sense of community and a sense of inclusivity was extremely valued among all participants. NWF has a variety of programs among youths and believes for the success of all NWF youth programming can accomplish if there is a cohesive guide on practices in order to create safe, inclusive spaces for youth.

Regardless if there are different purposes for each youth program at NWF, there should be common goals and practices to ensure the success of all participating youth. Similarly, I envision that NWF can develop indicators of success for all youth programming. Creating a cohesive guide and success indicators for NWF's youth programming can ensure that all youth feel seen, but are also given opportunities to foster deep relationships with their peers, empower youth, minimize burnout, and make sure the programming creates a safe-space that feels inclusive for youth. I hope that my interviews could provide a foundation in developing a cohesive guide and indicators of success for youth.

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