



APPALACHIAN TRAIL  
CONSERVANCY®

EMERGING  
LEADERS'  
SUMMIT  
IMPACT REPORT

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2023



# EMERGING LEADERS' SUMMIT (ELS)

An national program for young leaders ages 18-30 by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC)

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**JUST  
TRAILS**

The Summit gathered young people aged 18-35, strengthened connections between rising leaders and their networks, sparked momentum for action at the intersection of inclusion and stewardship, and provided a space for storytelling. The 2023 Summit fell over Indigenous Peoples Day, and the agenda integrated and honored Indigenous history and perspectives.



[appalachiantrail.org/summit](http://appalachiantrail.org/summit)

## THE EMERGING LEADERS' SUMMIT STORIES



The Appalachian Trail serves as my home away from home, a grounding place tied to both my past and my future.

**Read more of  
Bethany's ELS  
experience [HERE](#)**

The ELS morphed my initial apprehension into a determined resolve. The trails we blaze through leadership and collective action have the potential to impact hearts, minds, lives, and communities profoundly—if done with actual commitments to inclusivity.

**Read more of Devon's Story [HERE](#)**





# EMERGING LEADERS' SUMMIT

## NOV 6-8, 2023

### GOALS

**Connection:** ATC Leaders & Cohort

**Education:** Trail Skills and Safety

**Inspiration:** Reflection & Expression

### PROGRAM OBJECTIVES:

- Provide an educational experience for a diverse cohort of emerging leaders -- ages 18-35 -- looking to expand their skills and stewardship for the outdoors.
- Offer meaningful experiences, mentorship, and outdoor leadership opportunities.
- Inspire the next generation of trail stewards and conservation leaders.

### PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS:

- Modules from [Public Lands Curriculum](#)
- Essential [Trail Maintenance](#)



**26**  
participants

**9**  
speakers &  
instructors

**50+**  
Applications



**MOHICAN OUTDOOR CENTER**

### SPECIAL SPEAKER



**Joe Whittle**, an enrolled member of the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma, a descendant of the Delaware Nation Lenni Lenape, writer, photojournalist, educator, adventurer, and longtime backcountry wilderness ranger provided a special session during the Summit.

His writing and photographs around conservation, outdoor recreation, and Indigenous history and cultures have been published in outlets such as Outside Magazine, Alpinist Magazine, the New York Times, The Guardian, HuffPost, USA Today, and Backpacker Magazine. The Mohican Outdoor Center is located in Lenapehoking, his ancestral Lenape homeland, which encompasses Southeastern New York, Eastern Pennsylvania, and all of New Jersey and Delaware. He is currently completing a Creative Capital artist fellowship entitled Landback: The Return of Federal Lands to Native Americans. His discussion of decolonial perspectives on outdoor recreation and conservation was one of the highlights of the Summit.

## SUMMIT AGENDA



**This summit has been the single most useful and best-run conference I have attended. It's focus on discussion and networking have created a foundation for further connection between participants and a deeper devotion for the natural world itself.**



## SURVEY RESULTS - POST SUMMIT

# IMPACTS

### WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST TAKEAWAY?

**Historic Context & Respect:** Understanding the history of something is crucial for approaching it with mindfulness and respect. This especially applies to land stewardship and conservation efforts.

**Stewardship:** The emphasis on protecting the land and the significance of environmental stewardship is prominent throughout the reflections. There's a recognition of the importance of safeguarding natural systems and the environment.

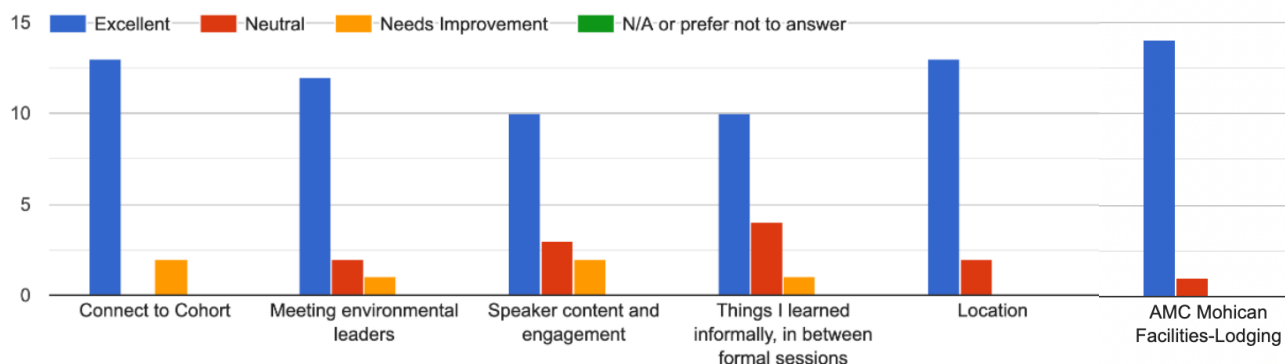
**Building Community:** Being surrounded by caring, passionate individuals in a diverse and well-educated field has a healing effect and serves as inspiration to continue the work in conservation.

**Career Development:** The summit acted as a catalyst for furthering a passion for environmental work and considering it as a potential career path. There's a shift in mindset from uncertainty about qualifications to exploring various avenues to contribute to environmental protection.



**525**  
training hours

### PROGRAM ELEMENTS RATED



### #1 SUGGESTION FOR IMPROVEMENT: More time to apply what was learned in the field

“The ATC’s Emerging Leaders Summit was an enriching experience, a powerful reminder of the importance of accessibility and inclusivity, and a rekindling of my passion for conservation. I am grateful for the opportunity to immerse myself in the natural world alongside a diverse community of dedicated conservationists, all while placing emphasis on the crucial role of Indigenous peoples and their profound connection to these lands. This event has been an incredible reminder of the remarkable power of collective dedication and shared passion in driving positive change

“This summit uses artful presentations on the history, accessibility and best use practices of the Appalachian Trail as catalysts for candid, open discussions about these attributes as related to environmental spaces throughout the United States. The atmosphere of respect and engagement as established by the facilitators allows for sharing of ideas and fruitful networking between young environmental science professionals which lays the groundwork for future collaboration throughout the field.



# APPLICANT SUMMARY

50+  
Applications



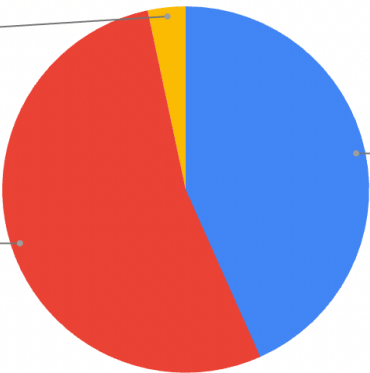
## APPLICANT DEMOGRAPHICS & REPRESENTATION

### Gender

they/them/theirs  
3.3%

He/him/his  
53.3%

she/her/hers  
43.3%



White/Caucasian  
25.0%

Native American  
5.0%

Korean American  
5.0%

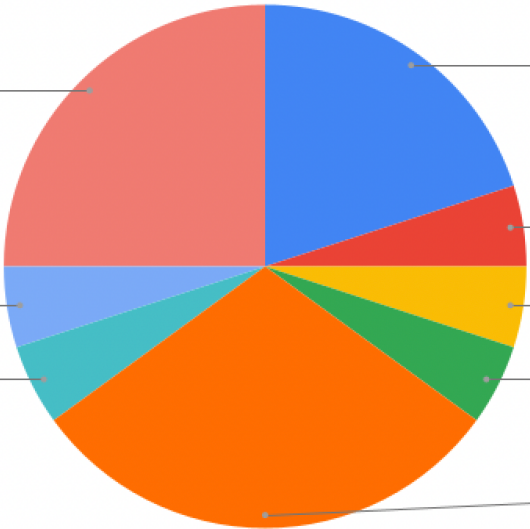
African American  
20.0%

Asian  
5.0%

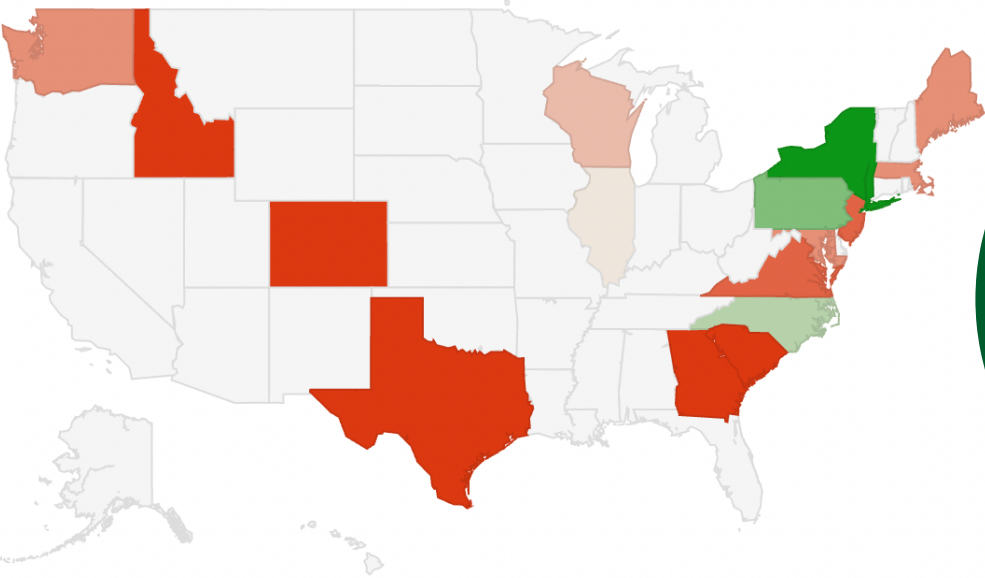
Biracial  
5.0%

Chinese  
5.0%

Hispanic  
30.0%



## STATE REPRESENTATION, + 1 FROM CANADA





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# PARTICIPANT REFLECTION



## EMERGING LEADERS' SUMMIT 2023

### Reflection from Participant, Bethany Barrell

It was a Sunday, not quite 7AM, and the brisk October air spilled over us as we rounded the top of the hill and stopped to absorb the shadowy views of the valley beneath. The hallmark of the Appalachian Trail, white blazes dotted the rocky ridgeline, and we trekked on to our destination, the Catfish Fire Tower. One by one, our headlamps flickered off as the first reds and yellows of dawn streaked the eastern sky, revealing the changing colors of autumn's Wild East along the mountain's slope.

With being fresh out of high school and midway into a whirlwind freshman year of college, returning to the Trail for the ATC's Emerging Leaders' Summit was like a breath of fresh air. The Appalachian Trail serves as my home away from home, a grounding place tied to both my past and my future. I've backpacked since fifth grade, so the AT is a source of nostalgia. However, it is also a source of inspiration; I decided to study biology because of the experiences I had while exploring the outdoors as a child.

During the Summit, I had the opportunity to not just reconnect with this important piece of my life but also to consider how I was part of its conservation and management. I was reminded that conservation is more than just protecting wild lands or genetic diversity; conservation is intentionally focused on human benefit as well as biological benefit, protecting wild lands so they can be fruitful *and* enjoyed. We branched into issues of accessibility, environmental justice, and public lands history.

I left the Summit feeling unusually hopeful. Issues of public lands use and conservation are complicated, and the fight for sustainability and change in the management of natural resources often feels like a losing battle. And yet, surrounded by passionate hobbyists, students, and professionals, I was encouraged by the value of small victories, which propel us forward into change.

A few weeks after returning home, I applied the new ideas and understanding I gained at the summit and presented a speech for my freshman public speaking class, in which I focused on the value of the Trail and what the Trail could provide for my classmates. I haven't yet discovered where I fit into the story of public lands and the Appalachian Trail, but I see a future in which I and other members of my generation are educators and fighters, defending our public lands for the benefit of our generation and the next. I look forward to making change and seeing what we accomplish.



# PARTICIPANT REFLECTION: A CONVERGENCE ON COMMON GROUND



## EMERGING LEADERS' SUMMIT 2023 Reflection from Participant, Devon Lespier

On October 6, brisk autumn temperatures first appeared, and the sun stayed tucked away in clouded skies. Leaves twirled down from treetops as the Mohican Outdoor Center welcomed us to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Emerging Leaders Summit (ELS) — and me into my 25th year.

Stepping out of the car felt like entering another realm far removed from the cityscape of Washington, DC, which I had left behind hours earlier. Here, sounds of nature and participant introductions replaced the urban clamor.

In the days that followed, the Appalachian Trail (AT) provided a scenic backdrop, weaving together the enthusiasm of young conservationists with the wisdom of our experienced facilitators.

Initially, celebrating my birthday deep in the woods and surrounded by complete strangers seemed daunting. Thankfully, the shared passion for conservation among myself and other participants made it easy to connect, and before long, those strangers were friends. By the end of the day, I found that the warmth from these newfound connections rivaled the cold weather.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion workshops filled the next day, and these principles followed us throughout the weekend. Together, we created a framework and shared understanding of what it meant to be trail leaders for a more inclusive world. In each session, I felt a growing assertiveness, encouraged by the group's contributions and support. Each workshop, story, and silent reflection genuinely fostered ideas and introspection on our roles as burgeoning leaders.

That evening, we all bonded around a fire after an impromptu lesson on coaxing flames out of damp kindling. The smells of s'mores and campfire smoke accompanied us until the promise of an early wake-up finally sent us to sleep, excited for the sunrise hike planned for the following day.

Subsequent workshops honed our knowledge of trail maintenance, conservation careers, and resource management. In addition to practical skills, discussions on leadership, and educational opportunities, I experienced the personal benefits of a renewed bond with nature and a recommitment to the values that first motivated me to become involved in environmental advocacy and conservation efforts. Learning about trail creation, the AT's extensive history, and the unique journey of each participant's journey enhanced my appreciation for the diverse AT community and its lands.

On our last day, Joe Whittle, the guest speaker, and an Indigenous photographer and journalist shared insights on the collective nature of stewardship, emphasizing the need to honor Indigenous perspectives as the original caretakers of this land vital to the AT's legacy. Joe's storytelling brought to life the history of the Delaware Water Gap and highlighted our duty to preserve such narratives as diligently as the trail itself.

The ELS morphed my initial apprehension into a determined resolve. The trails we blaze through leadership and collective action have the potential to impact hearts, minds, lives, and communities profoundly—if done with actual commitments to inclusivity. Ultimately, I felt privileged to have spent my birthday with a new network and community united in preserving the integrity, inclusivity, and accessibility of the AT and other natural spaces.



# PARTICIPANT REFLECTION: A CONVERGENCE ON COMMON GROUND



Looking ahead, lessons from the ELS will be a guiding light toward greater inclusivity and collaboration. We stand at a precipice, facing formidable and urgent challenges. Climate change is an imminent threat reshaping our ecosystems, interrupting migration patterns, and increasing extreme weather events that endanger wildlife and human communities. Habitat loss erodes biodiversity crucial to environmental health, and social inequalities inhibit access to green spaces, excluding marginalized groups from enjoying the natural world and its innumerable benefits.

However, with these challenges come immense opportunities. Digital platforms, once seen only as tools of disconnect, can now link conservationists on a global scale, enabling the rapid spread of information and ideas. In the modern world, we can mobilize collective efforts to an extent that has never been possible, educate on a global scale, and transform apathy into movements of change.

The increasing recognition of diverse voices — including Indigenous, marginalized, and youth communities — can help shape the dialogue surrounding conservation into one that is more potent, just, and inclusive. This is where authentic leadership can emerge, not from the upper echelons of power but from the grassroots level. Here, every individual can inspire communities, educate future stewards, and lead by example.

Effective leadership can ignite a collective spark that empowers action and uplifts those often overlooked or denied seats at the table. It's about weaving a conservation narrative that is inclusive of everyone and recognizes that planetary health is inextricably linked to the well-being of its inhabitants. We advance, knowing that each act of stewardship contributes to the larger tapestry of environmental resilience and sustainability.

Post-ELS, I envision my role in this work as a champion of this inclusive vision, advocating for and encouraging empowerment among marginalized groups and in uncharted territories. The Summit equipped me with a network of trailblazers, a wellspring of knowledge, and a vision that transcends today's obstacles and embraces tomorrow's solutions.

Stepping along the AT and beyond, we are not merely hikers or conservationists; we are custodians of a legacy — a legacy that honors the past, cherishes the present, and safeguards the future. In blazing the trail ahead, we lay the tracks for our successors, ensuring the AT — and our planet — are protected as generational treasures, open and accessible to all.