

Inter-Tribal Native Youth Congress Combats Climate Change

From June 28 to July 3, 2015, 89 teenage Native American, Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian women and men from 28 communities from across the country gathered at the U.S. Fish Wildlife Service's National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia for the first annual Inter-Tribal Youth Climate Leadership Congress. The event was a youth engagement partnership between the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the U.S Forest Service and U.S. Geological Survey.

The teens, ages 15 to 18, participated in the week-long Congress to learn how federal agencies are addressing climate change issues in Native American communities and how they can support the resilience and adaptability of their home areas in the face of climate challenges. The students were accompanied by 28 teachers and other adult community leaders from their home areas.

Native American professionals taught the students about climate science and traditional ecological knowledge and how changing climate is impacting Native food systems and ways of life across the country. All the speakers expressed to the students that traditional ways of life are not fading away because of climate challenges, but rather are evolving to respond to new ecological and social conditions, as generations of Native people have had to adapt before. The other main message to the Congress participants was the importance of learning from their elders and the imperative that the youth apply traditional teachings to current climate change challenges.

Each student passionately discussed their cultural values and beliefs and collectively ignited a discussion about tangible ways they could make a difference in their home communities. The students started to brainstorm solutions, to collaborate and lead their own discussions on climate change and how they will use their developing leadership skills and technical climate knowledge to address these issues in engaging tribal leaders, school officials and their peers in their home areas. Towards the end of the Congress, all students delivered group presentations with innovative ideas aimed to promote ecological and community sustainability in culturally appropriate ways for all represented peoples.

“When developing the Congress, we wanted to emphasize the importance of public service and involvement so we developed a service learning session to give students an opportunity to perform 4 hours of community service by removing invasive plant species and rebuilding a hiking trail down to the Potomac River,” said Jim Siegel, a National Conservation Training Center course leader, “We hope that students will take home a number of ideas and new skills from the Congress and begin to engage their peers and community leaders in the climate change conversation.”

The Congress youth marked their hard work by celebrating with an inspirational musical performance from Frank Waln, a Sicangu Lakota artist, activist, and rapper from the Rosebud Indian Reservation. The group also watched a movie by Keanu Jones, a young Navajo filmmaker that inspired traditional values and innovative practices around conserving water. To top off the Congress, a contemporary pow-wow was hosted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with all communities participating.

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