

# Northeast Region

## Native Earth Environment Youth Program

### Living In Harmony

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is comprised of six Nations bound together under one law: *The Great Law of Peace*. Together, the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas, and Tuscaroras, are united by a common goal to live in harmony. Haudenosaunee means “People of the Long House” and the nations are spread throughout the lower Great Lakes and down to the Carolinas. In 1995, the Haudenosaunee Grand Council [mandated the Confederacy to appoint a delegation](#) to address environmental issues that cross political boundaries. They began by attending the [Summit of the Elders](#) in Rio de Janeiro, and continued their work within the United Nations (UN) framework that led up to the [Decade of Indigenous Peoples](#). The Haudenosaunee played a large part in crafting the UN Declaration on the [Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).



*Students learn traditional fire starting techniques. All photos courtesy of Neil Patterson.*

Flash forward to 2009, and the Haudenosaunee Environmental Task Force (HETF) helped develop the [Native Earth Environment Youth Program](#), a program within the [Center for Native Peoples and the Environment](#) at the State University of New York’s College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF). Using the Haudenosaunee rationale of cooperation, high school students from the northeast come together to understand how scientific ecological knowledge (SEK) can coexist with traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) to solve environmental problems. Much in the way a medicine wheel includes mind, body, emotion, and spirit, a whole person is one who knows both science and culture, not just the intellectual aspects of life. Looking to indigenous science and lifeways is not at odds with western science.

The program is structured around the [Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address](#)

[\(Kaneharatechreh\)](#), which is a central tenet of the Haudenosaunee way of thinking and viewing the world. Each day of the program is structured by using the progression of the Thanksgiving Address elements, and covers SEK such as habitat, water and air quality, and biodiversity, alongside TEK of the same topics taught by elders and other knowledge practitioners.



*Traditional pottery making.*



*Students learn about skinning animals.*



*Students at the United Nations.*

### **2019 Focused on Climate Change**

The 2019 Native Earth Environment Youth Program focused on the topic of climate change, and for the first time since its inception, students were offered college credits. The Program was held at one of ESF's campuses in the middle of Adirondack Park. This setting is ideal for youth to talk about climate change, what they are in danger of losing, how things have moved and changed over time, and what the different scenarios are that future generations are facing. The Kaneharatechreh was used alongside other cultural teachings to think about climate change impacts to the elements memorialized in the Address. The students were asked to come up with statements of impact and change that they saw from their own perspectives. A delegation of students then had the option of taking this message to the United Nations Climate Week in New York City, held September 20-27, 2019, which served as the second part of the program. A third component of the Native Earth Program was to take part in an annual youth climate summit, held in partnership with [The Wild Center](#). It is here that the students return to report on their experiences and actions associated with their communities at the local level.

The Native Youth Environment Camp uses SEK to help the students understand how anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are causing climate change. They look at what the existing transportation, food, medical, housing, and water systems are, and how they are contributing to climate change. They do ecological footprint exercises, and address greenhouse gas equivalencies. In addition, they look at comprehensive solutions through alternative energy, food, and material systems.

Beyond the challenge of reducing greenhouse gas emissions when attempting to mitigate climate change, one of the biggest challenges the Native Youth Environment Camp sees is a loss of native language. TEK is innately embedded in original languages, so valuing and protecting TEK leads to greater protection of native language, and native language fluency is integral in protecting both cultural and environmental resources.



*Picking sweetgrass.*

### **Changes in the Region**

Changes that the Haudenosaunee Confederacy nations have seen include shifts and movement among species. For example, sugar maple sugaring season is changing, since sugaring requires specific temperatures. Sugar maples are considered to be a leader of the trees, and there are concerns that they might leave the area. There are indications that they might move north to follow cooler temperatures, however there are more factors than just temperature that affect their bioregion, such as soil moisture, geology, and soil minerals. These needs mean that they might not be able to migrate, but might instead become extinct. Fortunately, most models do not predict complete extinction. Even so, the stress of change impacts not only the access to and availability of sugar maples, but also the animals and insects that are integrated into the sugar maple bioregion, which can be even more threatened.

Berries have always been a significant part of the culture for the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The specific environmental gradients that berries require in order to ripen are changing. A Confederacy prophecy speaks to a time when certain berries vanish; the Nations of the Confederacy are currently watching for this big change to occur. Similarly, the growing season for the cultivation of heirloom varieties of corn is changing. Farming is at the core of who the Haudenosaunee people are, so figuring out different strategies for growing food with altered precipitation cycles and planting times is a current challenge they are facing.

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy Nations live cyclically with the seasons, observing and giving thanks for each season and each species. In the winter, there is a men's game called Snow Snake that requires snow cover on the ground. Declining snow cover in recent years has reduced opportunities for Snow Snake and other seasonally-dependent cultural practices.

Engaging youth in the Native Youth Environment Camp is one powerful strategy the Confederacy has found to uphold their mandate to address environmental issues. By combining SEK with TEK, the Haudenosaunee are awakening the "whole person" inside these native



youths, so that they may go on to know their native language, embody deep knowledge, and truly live in harmony as the Great Law of Peace instructs.



*A student canoe trip on Tupper Lake.*

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This profile was developed in 2019 by Dara Marks-Marino, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, Northern Arizona University, with financial support from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The profile is available on the Tribes & Climate Change website: [www7.nau.edu/itep/main/tcc/Tribes/](http://www7.nau.edu/itep/main/tcc/Tribes/). The tribal climate change profiles featured on the website are intended to be a pathway to increasing knowledge among tribal and non-tribal organizations interested in learning about climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Special thanks to Neil Patterson for his assistance in developing this profile.

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**Citation:** Marks-Marino, D. (October 2019) Native Youth Community Adaptation and Leadership Congress. Climate Change Program, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, Northern Arizona University. Available at: [www7.nau.edu/itep/main/tcc/Tribes/ne\\_navEarthEYP](http://www7.nau.edu/itep/main/tcc/Tribes/ne_navEarthEYP)

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