

National

Native Youth Community Adaptation and Leadership Congress

Two Way Street

Relationships are a two way street and based on trust. The relationship that tribes have with the federal government has many challenges, so anything that can be done to foster trust and build a better relationship, should be done. Often, the people who work for federal agencies have good intentions, but might not fully understand the trust responsibility they have with tribes, nor how to best work with tribes.

The federal agencies (Including Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, US Forest Service, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) that have come together every year for the last five years to hold the Native Youth Community Adaptation and Leadership Congress (NYCALC) <https://www.nycalc.org/> are working to serve as an example of how federal organizations can support tribal nations and communities, and through the NYCALC experience, are consequently learning how to do their own jobs better. These federal agencies understand the value of fostering leadership in tribal youth, and in supporting them and their communities once they return home. Held at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia, the Congress is a week long interactive conference, attended by a diverse mix of Native American students. It is designed to reach out to emerging leaders in tribal nations and communities, and provide a setting where they can learn about climate change and other environmental issues, and how these issues affect them, their own communities, and neighboring communities.



Student participants prepare their group project by interviewing one another. Photo by Alejandro Morales/USFWS.

Student Led

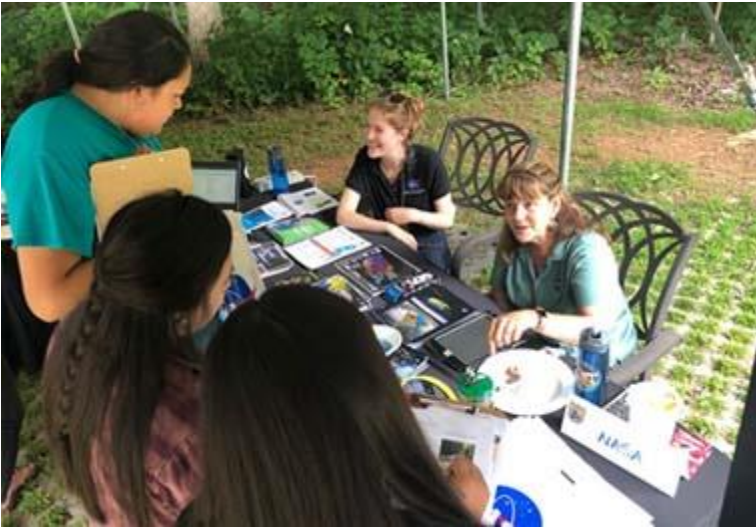
To attend NYCALC, students must submit an application that demonstrates that they are not only thoughtful individuals, but that they also have a degree of support from their community. That support system is demonstrated by requiring teams of 3-5 students to apply together along with a mentor who will attend the Congress with them.

Students arrive with a diverse list of concerns they encounter in their communities: litter, erosion control, confidence in themselves, the political structure of their government or the social structure of their community, protecting sacred sites, legacy pollution (such as from uranium mining or military bases), and traditional practices that are being impacted. One Junior Faculty member shared the story about losing an uncle because he fell through thin ice while out hunting when it should have been frozen solid. Another saw 50 feet of stream bank eroding away in one storm, and another witnessed structures taken out to sea right before his eyes.

Each Congress follows an approach called Open Space Technology (OST), which puts the focus on the students to drive the process of developing a research project. During the planning period for the Congress, the federal agency partners develop “the big question” that will be used throughout the week of NYCALC. In 2019, “the big question” was: As future leaders how can you use your voice and skills to make a difference for the environment while continuing to respect your culture and strengthen your sovereignty? At the beginning of the Congress, students are presented the question, and begin developing answers that they write onto notecards. Then they parse the notecards into similar veins of thought onto a wall. Themes begin to emerge, such as civic engagement, education, or community awareness. From those themes, the students create mini-circles where they work for the rest of the week in teams. Adults at the Congress are there to help the students access resources, and Junior faculty members (who are generally college-aged) help create a mentoring environment, but the entire process is student driven: the students determine what happens during the rest of the Congress, including what types of presentations they will develop, what activity or idea they will implement when they return home to their communities, and how it will benefit their communities. Once the students return home, the federal partners continue their support by providing the opportunity to apply for mini-grants of \$1,000-\$1,200 to implement their ideas.



Student participants add their responses to the big question to a wall to get a comprehensive understanding. Photo by Alejandro Morales/USFWS.



Student participants learn about N.A.S.A. and potential career opportunities with the federal agency. Photo courtesy of N.A.S.A.

Adaptation, Resiliency, and Growth

The “A” in NYCALC stands for “adaptation”. NYCALC honors that “adaptation” and “adaptive resilience” can mean many different things depending on the circumstances. Environmental changes, language preservation, cultural impacts, food security, land access and health, and of course climate change all require perseverance and adaptability, just as Native Americans have done for eons. For those who work for NYCALC and the students who attend NYCALC, taking a holistic approach to adaptation, one that includes culture, lands, self-determination, natural resources, identities, language, and more, is an integral part of the process.

Faculty that are involved with NYCALC often come into the process not realizing how strong and resilient the students are. Many of the students have overcome great obstacles, yet they attend NYCALC and work towards taking on leadership roles despite their hardships. NYCALC becomes a safe space, with vulnerable sharing happening by the end of the Congress. The professionals and faculty grow as well: they learn humility in understanding the tribal youths’ struggles, to temper their eagerness to talk about environmental protection and conservation, and to see the students more holistically.

By the end of the week, students have a deeper sense of self, language, culture, and tribal sovereignty. The students show deep passion in keeping those aspects alive and holding on to their traditional ways.



Native Youth Community Adaptation Leadership Congress participants pose for a picture in the Roosevelt room at the National Conservation Training Center. Photo by Melissa Gonzales/USFWS.

Unique Challenges

Being away from home for the first time is challenging for everyone, but for many tribal youth this may be their first time ever leaving their reservation. Concerns include what food will be available, what will be the group dynamic, and simply, how to be themselves in this new setting. Although mentors accompany them and help alleviate many of their concerns, they suddenly are living in close quarters surrounded by many different indigenous students, who have different practices, clothing norms, and dynamics, and they do not have their elders there to speak on their behalf. NYCALC treats these as learning opportunities, and the Congress culminates in a cultural gathering. Students leave feeling proud of where they are from and their indigenuity, and appreciating what others bring as well.

Many tribes hold traditional camps during the summer, and many also include the summer harvest as an important cultural practice. These opportunities are what build a strong sense of culture for tribal youth, but also mean that many youths are not available to attend NYCALC. Additionally, the faculty who organize NYCALC are challenged to not only do effective outreach to spread the word about the Congress, but also to make sure they are meeting the needs of the youth who attend without westernizing the way it is conducted. To that end, many of the federal partners in NYCALC are working to better indigenize their respective federal programs, and they hold debriefs every day of the Congress to learn from their experiences. The greatest challenge for the organizers? The desire to want to do more.

Bringing the Projects Home

The students arrive at NYCALC with a rough idea of a meaningful project to implement when they return home, and fine tune their ideas during the Congress. Then they can apply for the mini-grants to implement their ideas. Projects have included reforestation and trail restoration efforts, traditional food harvesting, partnerships with National Parks, initiating leadership conferences and adaptation workshops, developing gardens, and implementing recycling programs.

One of the first projects was developed by a group of nine students from three different schools on the Mescalero Apache reservation. The students were mentored by Michael Montoya, who was the youth leadership director at the time. They had spoken at length about the use of natural resources and understanding the roles and responsibilities that individuals can play, as contrasted with the impacts of agrobusiness, the preparation of food for the marketplace, the kinds of farming practices that harm the environment, and the loss of self-reliance and food sovereignty that has developed since the end of World War II. To address those concerns, the students designed and built a hoop house on one of the school campuses that could be enclosed in the winter and used as a greenhouse, then opened in warmer weather.

Although the project was impactful for the students, even more poignant was the experience of attending NYCALC. They came home so motivated to share the importance of climate action with their leadership that they approached Tribal Council with a presentation on the impacts to their people from climate change. Astonishingly, by the time the students were on their way home, they had gained such a sense of empowerment and pride in their culture that when they were asked by an elderly woman at the airport “who” they were, and she responded in ignorance, “I thought you were all dead,” they were able to say with confidence: we are still here, and we are better and stronger than ever.

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/. 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.

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For more information please contact:

Nikki Cooley, Co-Manager

928/523-7046

Nikki.Cooley@nau.edu

Karen Cozzetto, Co-Manager

928/523-6758

Karen.Cozzetto@nau.edu

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Northern Arizona University, South San Francisco Street, Flagstaff, Arizona 86011