

*Blazing a New Trail for Youth Corps: Wildfire and Climate Resilience in Stewardship*

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In 2021, wildfire season started early and close to home. On June 9, an unattended campfire near Moab grew into the 8,952 acre Pack Creek fire. Less than 10 miles away, members of Canyon Country Youth Corps watched plumes of smoke rise over the La Sal mountain range, speculating whether their recent project, a fence they had constructed in Pack Creek, would survive the blaze. That day, the vague threat of climate change materialized for a group of young people.

Born of the legacy of the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps, contemporary youth corps in the Four Corners region tackle invasive species management, riparian corridor restoration and recreational infrastructure, such as trail building and campsite maintenance. Meanwhile, the climate crisis brews. The growing scope and season of wildfires compels established corps to retool their programs to address this burgeoning challenge. This presentation will demonstrate how addressing wildfires systematically through conservation corps work can lay the groundwork to reconnect with ancestral stewardship practices and furnish young participants with the emotional and practical skills needed to confront the growing threat presented by wildfires.

Thoughtful training empowers the future generation of wilderness firefighters and advocates for alternative management in the field. The mission of youth conservation corps is not simply to complete conservation projects, but to foster a personal connection to stewardship while equipping participants with job readiness skills. The outlook for wildland firefighting, a career that does not require a traditional postsecondary degree, grows. Though not all participants will follow this path, they still benefit from learning about fire treatment to prepare for a future that foretells unprecedented wildfire. The study of the long-term emotional effect of experiencing a fire in one's community has begun fairly recently, however there is evidence of PTSD among survivors and witnesses of fires. Climate anxiety, the dread evoked by reading the latest report on global warming or witnessing a historic weather event firsthand, can be countered by finding a measure of control in one's own life.

Learning the science behind wildfires, the anthropological history of indigenous relationships with fire, and practical strategies to manage fire fuels as a youth corps participant gives agency to the next generation of leaders. The climate crisis has shown a spotlight on the work of conservation corps: at this inflection point, organizers can passively continue course, or address the threat of wildfires head-on.