

# DEEPENING COMMITMENTS:

## Working Toward Equity and Inclusion When Connecting Youth to the Outdoors

*A Case Study*



YOUTH  
OUTSIDE

# INTRODUCTION

THE BENEFITS OF SPENDING TIME OUTDOORS ARE WELL KNOWN. Outdoor time promotes physical and mental health, relieves stress and anxiety, and improves social skills.<sup>1</sup> We also know that time in nature is particularly important for youth development and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> Yet young people in the U.S. spend an alarming 90% of their time indoors.<sup>3</sup> While the fields of outdoor and environmental education have been striving to meet this need and help reverse this trend, the reality is that for many youth, the problem is compounded by systemic barriers. Access to programs varies by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. For example, the Outdoor Foundation reports that 70% of outdoor recreation participants are white.<sup>4</sup>

Underserved youth experience a range of barriers to accessing outdoor programs, including:

- Lack of information, not being aware of opportunities
- Distance and lack of transportation
- Cost of programs
- Lack of equipment
- Safety concerns
- Parental permission or support
- Feeling unwelcome and experiences of discrimination
- Lack of programming that is relevant to the target youth audience

There are positive signs that the broader environmental field, including youth-serving organizations, recognizes the issue and is beginning to respond. For example, the National Outdoor Leadership School has created a Diversity and Inclusion initiative, which includes scholarships for students from under-resourced communities, cultural competency training, a mentoring program for participants from under-

represented identity groups.<sup>5</sup> The North American Association for Environmental Education has adopted a set of diversity and inclusion principles and created a working group for exploring related issues and resources within its online professional development network.<sup>6</sup> While these are steps in the right direction, most programming in the field is provided by small, place-based organizations with limited resources and capacity. Supporting these local groups to engage underserved members of their communities is a vital priority.





Youth Outside supports outdoor and environmental programs and organizations in northern and central California to be more responsive to these challenges. Youth Outside helps these groups identify and address barriers to equitable participation in their own organizations. In particular, the organization offers consulting, coaching, and training that addresses the systemic and cultural barriers to inclusion. Logistical issues like making gear and transportation available, and reducing program costs are generally more readily recognized and easier to mitigate than barriers connected to culture, institutions, and power dynamics that are deeply embedded in our society. Youth Outside supports organizations in the outdoor and environmental education field to understand inequitable participation patterns within this broader social context, and provides tools and training that help them respond effectively.

In 2016, Youth Outside collaborated with the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Morgan Family Foundation to offer the Cultural Relevancy Series, a 7-month program designed to build their grantees' capacity in cultural relevancy, equity, and inclusion. The present case study describes this experience, summarizes lessons learned by both Youth Outside and the program participants, and explores the potential of the model to support others in the field, in addition to a broader application in other sectors.

## YOUTH OUTSIDE'S MISSION

To ensure that the lived experience of all youth is honored as part of the outdoor experience. We provide grantmaking, capacity-building and training to promote healthy lives and inspire future champions of the planet.



# 2016 CULTURAL RELEVANCY SERIES

Youth Outside is recognized as a leader in providing cultural relevancy capacity building and training services to the outdoor field. We have operated an annual cultural relevancy training series for our own grantees and community partners since 2015, and also provide training and coaching services directly to outdoor and environmental organizations on a consulting basis.

In response to a request from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Morgan Family Foundation, Youth Outside developed the 2016 Cultural Relevancy Series to support their current cohort of environmental education grantees. In common, these grantees have missions that focus on ensuring greater access and participation from underserved youth, typically ranging in age from 7 to 18. In designing the Series, Youth Outside sought to create a safe learning community where participants would gain a greater understanding of cultural relevancy and its connection to the direct experience that youth have through their programs.

The Cultural Relevancy Series included three major components:

1. Seminars covering foundational cultural relevancy concepts and their application in transforming program content and delivery, organizational culture, and operations.
2. Coaching sessions tailored to the needs of participating organizations, with a focus on helping each organization design cultural relevancy projects to steer systems-level change and long-term impact.
3. An opportunity for direct practice through the development and implementation of an action plan to increase cultural relevancy in a priority area identified by each organization.

## SEMINAR TOPICS

1. What is Cultural Relevancy?
2. Changing Organizational Culture
3. Examining Our Unconscious Biases
4. Board Development: Recruiting with Intention
5. Developing Programs with a Culturally Relevant Lens
6. Exploring Power and Privilege
7. Culmination



## Seminars

Monthly seminars were held from March through October 2016. These learning modules grounded participants in a basic understanding of key concepts and terms related to social justice and cultural relevancy, explored how unconscious bias operates, examined the nuts and bolts involved in shifting an organization's culture (e.g. Board development, human resources policies, hiring practices), and presented best practices for developing programs and curricula using a cultural relevancy lens. Seminars were led and facilitated by Youth Outside staff, Laura Rodriguez and Rena Payan, with occasional guest facilitators. The seminar focusing on Board practices included a panel with several guest speakers, some of which represented organizations who have intentionally shifted their Board composition to reflect the communities they serve. Depending on the focus of each session, members from all levels of the organizations attended, including Board members, Executive Directors, managers, and program staff.

## CULTURAL RELEVANCY:

Cultural Relevancy is effectively reaching and engaging communities and their youth in a manner that is consistent with the cultural context and values of that community; while effectively addressing the disparities of diversity and inclusion within an organization's entire structure.





## Coaching

Each participating organization received four hours of coaching with Darlene Hall, Ph.D., an expert advisor in nonprofit organizational development. A psychologist, Dr. Hall assists organizations to identify, address, and unlearn implicit constructs of power and privilege that maintain inequities. Participants were supported to examine their organizations critically, identifying specific deficiencies and barriers that prevent them from being inclusive, fully engaging the communities they serve. They were coached through the process of identifying the concrete steps they would pursue to advance cultural relevancy and equity in the project they identified.

## Projects

Once a specific project was identified by each organization, they were asked to develop a brief proposal designed to advance cultural relevancy and apply for microgrants of up to \$3,000 to support its implementation. Project activities ranged from Board training and non-traditional recruitment strategies, to improving outreach by creating travelling education exhibits, to cultivating an internal culture of inclusiveness by revising policies and practices. (See Cohort Projects, next page.)



“We have always focused on hiring educational staff that reflect the youth we serve... However, we had not previously thought of cultural relevancy on an organizational level. This series of workshops has made more clear what other work can be done in this regard, as well as provided tools and examples for moving in that direction.”

— *Ventana Wildlife Society*

## COHORT PROJECTS

### CuriOdyssey

To bring the CuriOdyssey experience to underserved youth who might not have the opportunity to actually visit CuriOdyssey by constructing a travelling exhibit for use off site.

### Environmental Volunteers

To better connect the EcoCenter with community residents through culturally relevant programming and recruitment of volunteers who reflect the diversity of the community by hosting a “Culture and Nature” series that celebrates different cultures’ connections to nature.

### Hidden Villa

To have a more diverse staff that is better prepared to support the work of equity and inclusion by increasing staff familiarity with cultural relevancy issues through ongoing staff training and shifting Hidden Villa’s hiring and recruitment processes via evaluation of existing policies and practices.

### Marine Science Institute

To train the board of trustees on the importance of cultural relevancy and increase the diversity of the board to better reflect the community served by engaging board in cultural relevancy training and engaging in non-traditional board recruitment opportunities.

### Ventana Wildlife Society

To increase the cultural diversity of the organization from top down by recruiting board members who are representative of Monterey County and the youth and families served, specifically individuals who identify as Hispanic.

### Vida Verde

To build a staff that is more reflective of Vida Verde participants and to build an office and staff culture that is truly inclusive by revising internal policies and procedures and implementing regular practices that create an working culture of understanding, sensitivity, and inclusiveness.



## RESULTS & PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

A total of 18 grantee organizations were invited to participate in the Cultural Relevancy Series. Among these, seven self-identified as having the capacity and organizational readiness to take on a rigorous training program, and ultimately six participants completed the full Cultural Relevancy Series:

- CuriOdyssey
- Environmental Volunteers
- Hidden Villa
- Marine Science Institute
- Ventana Wildlife Society
- Vida Verde

A total of 19 individuals from across the different organizations participated in the program. Surveys taken at the beginning of the series and at completion revealed that the program was successful in enabling participating organizations to increase their understanding and application of a cultural relevancy lens. On a five point scale, with five being high and one being low, only 27%

of respondents rated their organization's understanding of cultural relevancy better than three before starting the series. At the end of the program, 73% gave their organization a score above three.

The seminars addressed challenging topics, often evoking strong emotions and inviting participants to their personal edge. Cultivating a group dynamic of trust and safety was therefore a top priority. Evaluations of each individual seminar confirmed that facilitators were successful in creating a brave space where participants felt supported to be vulnerable and take risks. For example, an early session encouraged participants to rate and quantify the degree to which their organization's culture and practices are culturally relevant, or working to address cultural relevancy. (See Organizational Survey, next page.) This self-evaluation required participants to reflect honestly and courageously on the areas where they have made institutional progress and where there are opportunities to do more. The following is one perspective from Vida Verde about the challenge of cultural relevancy.

### CHALLENGE OF CULTURAL RELEVANCY — A PERSPECTIVE

“Vida Verde’s mission is to provide outdoor education for free for low-income youth, and while our students are 99% urban youth of color, our staff is consistently middle-class and white. We have been ready for a while to make changes, but have not made real time to do so, and often times have felt at a loss for what concrete steps we should take to begin changing the culture of our staff and organization. Participating in the Cultural Relevancy Series has helped us make tangible progress. I’ve been challenged in each meeting we’ve had personally and I feel that my own journey with power and privilege has been catapulted forward. I’ve also been challenged by owning up to mistakes I’ve made and will likely continue to make as both an employer and a human. This is long-term, lifelong work. This is not something we can fix overnight, and it will take continued effort, dedication and intention. I have to be willing to be vulnerable and make mistakes when working on something as complex as cultural and institutional change. It can be very frustrating, when you and your organization are ready and willing to make changes, but then they don’t happen immediately. I’m looking forward to five years from now, when I can look back and see the changes that will happen as a result of the work we are doing now.”



—Testimonial by Laura Sears, Founder and Development Director, Vida Verde



THE WORK OF  
CULTURAL RELEVANCY  
ORGANIZATIONAL SURVEY

SCORING RUBRIC

- 1 - We do NOT do this at all
- 2- We do this irregularly, or very little
- 3- We do this, but not regularly
- 4- We do this regularly

AREA	PRACTICE	SCORE
Hiring Practices	We recruit applicants from the communities that we serve	
	We give special consideration to applicants that live within the communities that we serve	
	We incentivize bilingual applicants that speak the language of the community we serve	
Staff Development & Retention	Opportunities to learn about the communities being served are created, promoted and incentivized for staff	
	Staff, community leaders, and stakeholders are brought together in formal and informal settings	
	We regularly and intentionally celebrate difference	
Difficult Conversations	Crises and news events that dis-proportionately affect low-income and communities of color are addressed in staff meetings	
	We encourage candor	
	Crises and news event that disproportionately affect low-income and communities of color are addressed in board meetings	
Accountability	There is a feedback loop for employees to address micro and macro aggressions in the workplace	
	Organizational values are posted and reviewed on a regular basis	
	Management and board speak with one voice about issues regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion raised by staff	
Community Engagement	Written materials are in the languages of the communities that we serve	
	Information and program applications are accessible through many avenues that are not limited to the use of technology.	
	Community based events are held in the languages of the communities we serve	
	Translation services are timely and easily accessible	
Program Development	Programs are offered in the language of participants	
	There is a feedback loop in place for program participants to critique programs	
	There is opportunity for program participants to inform programs	
	Program participants are viewed as a priority stakeholder	
80 - 71: Doing the work		TOTAL
70 - 51: We know there is work to be done		
50 - 0: It's time to get to work		
<i>This resource was developed by Youth Outside and requires the accompaniment of facilitated conversation and the related curriculum for greatest impact.</i>		



## DEFENSE MECHANISMS

“I don’t see color”

Counter examples (e.g. President Obama)

Invalidating (e.g. “you’re being overly sensitive”)

“Reverse racism”

Prioritizing “guilt” above accountability

Having an emotional response (ex: crying) that supersedes the experience of the person of color

“It was just a joke”

Enumerating their friends or other relationships with people of color



These examples illustrate why cultural relevancy efforts are so challenging, and why individuals and organizations need support to navigate this work successfully. It is no small task to become conscious of the taken-for-granted dynamics that operate invisibly in organizations and society. Developing capacity for self-assessment has to happen at both the personal level and institutionally, understanding that this is an incremental process. At the individual level this work tends to trigger longstanding defense mechanisms, while at the organizational level, managers generally do not intuitively know what sort of concrete steps they can take to support an authentically inclusive internal culture.

The evaluation process confirmed that the sessions increased participants’ understanding of cultural relevancy and helped them gain specific strategies, practices, and tools to support them in applying their learning. For example:

**100%** BETTER UNDERSTOOD  
how power and privilege impact dynamics  
in communication

**83%** IMPROVED THEIR UNDERSTANDING  
of unconscious bias and 82% said they better  
understood microaggressions

**80%** COULD IDENTIFY HALLMARKS OF  
culturally responsive instructional approaches  
and 90% said they could now spot curriculum  
bias which could negatively impact the youth who  
experience programs

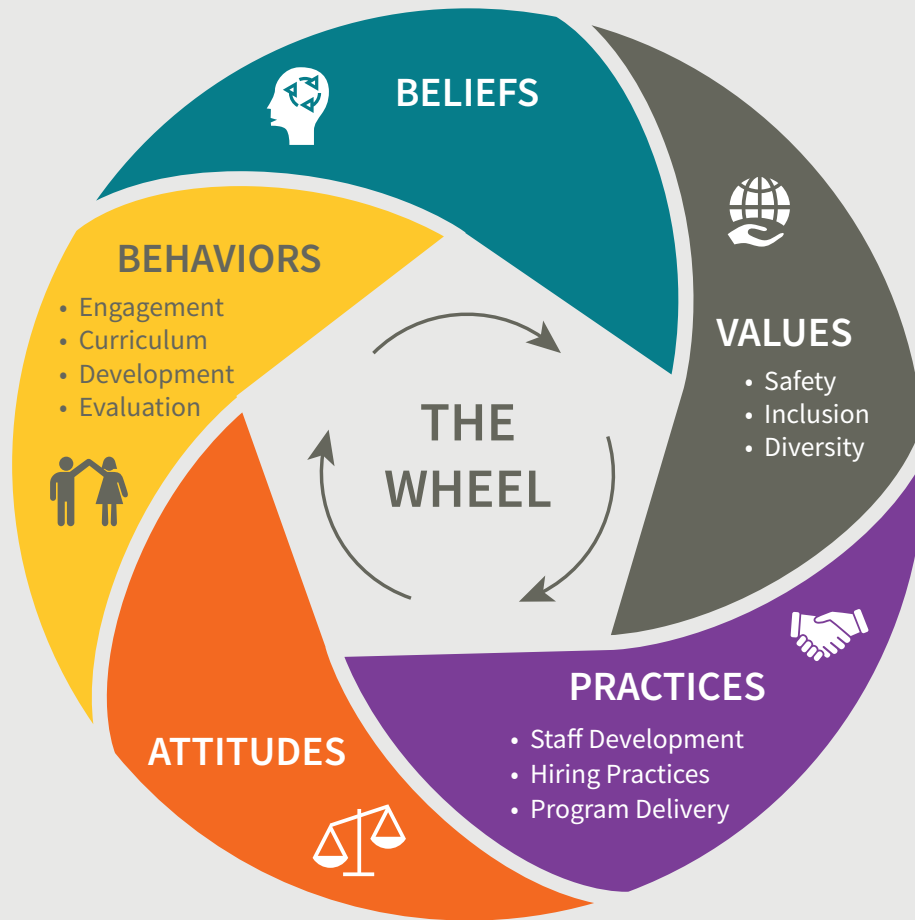
**75%** WALKED AWAY WITH  
resources and tools to develop a more culturally  
relevant Board of Directors

Seminar feedback revealed that participants were especially responsive to the second session on Changing Organizational Culture. In this seminar Youth Outside led an exercise called “The Wheel” about how individual beliefs affect organizational values, and in turn, impact program delivery. (See Wheel Graphic, next page.) Participants benefited from exploring how prevalent but unspoken beliefs in their organizations shape the experience of colleagues as well as the youth they serve.

“Most helpful was expanding and deepening my understanding of cultural relevancy beyond supporting diversity. I liked the practical elements which directly supported affecting institutional change at my organization. The Cultural Relevancy Series has had an even greater impact on me personally: I continually use the cultural relevancy lens in my work, discussions, and planning.”

— Anonymous

An organization's culture comprises many things, primary among those are shared values, practices, and the behaviors of an organization. The following are some key areas to evaluate as an organization seeks to become more culturally relevant.



Even so, there were a number of areas where participants felt they could continue to deepen their learning, expressing interest in more training on: developing a better understanding of systemic barriers operating in their communities, cultural relevancy in curriculum and program design, and cultivating greater inclusion in their office environment. Youth Outside views this appetite for further learning as a positive indication that participants now understand cultural relevancy as an integral, ongoing component of organizational development.

Participants expressed the sentiment that they would have benefited from completing the seminars before embarking on the coaching and project phase. Receiving all of the information and learning from the Series would have assisted them in identifying a priority area, and making decisions about appropriate tools and strategies to use in their project plan. Additionally, while participants found value in working with a coach, they expressed the desire for more coaching hours as they developed and refined their plans.

In terms of the impact of the microgrants awarded to each organization, participants expressed that the microgrants directly impacted youth-serving program enhancements as well as shifts to internal culture and leadership structure. Overall, participants shared that the microgrants helped to spark and resource institutional change while offering a way to improve program strategies for inclusive youth engagement.

In response to a survey conducted in May 2017, six months after completing the Cultural Relevancy Series, 100% of respondents reported that they are actively working on integrating cultural relevancy into their organizations.



Participants expressed appreciation for the tangible tools offered by Youth Outside throughout the Series, and expressed demand for additional worksheets or other action-based resources in order to bring the work back to their colleagues to share and spark institutional change. In terms of key challenges, a majority of respondents named staff turnover as a barrier to moving this work forward. Participants noted that inclusive and culturally-relevant practices or behaviors are not mainstream operating norms in the environmental field. For this reason, engaging staff and volunteer stakeholders in cultural relevancy work requires education and training. Similarly, in order for staff to be successful, leadership teams must bring a stable and ongoing commitment to this work as change takes time.

Finally, participants were also asked for input about the types of resources beyond the Cultural Relevancy Series that they believed would be valuable in supporting them and similar organizations in the outdoor field. Their top suggestions were:

- Tailored trainings for board, staff and volunteers. Such workshops and trainings would cover a variety of topics including basic orientation to cultural relevancy concepts, curriculum development, board recruitment strategies, and creating an inclusive organizational culture.

- Cultural Relevancy Toolkit. This collection of tools, group exercises, best practices, and other guidance resources on cultural relevancy would empower anyone to engage their team on the subject.
- Cohort re-convenings. Participants drew significant value from the collaborative and safe space woven throughout the seminar series, where the opportunity to gather regularly to share progress, thorny challenges, and best practices with peers on the same journey would support continued growth and accountability.
- Ongoing coaching. Receiving objective, expert guidance geared towards making progress on specific goals was seen as a vital method to achieve lasting organizational transformation.

“Participating in this seminar series and then talking about our organization specifically as we were developing our grant proposal was perspective-changing for each of us. It prompted [us] to start using a cultural relevancy lens each time we participate in planning, programming, and decision making.”

— CuriOdyssey



## REFLECTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the most exciting connections that we saw participants make in the Series was how the application of cultural relevancy directly enhanced their ability to positively impact youth. Impacts included:

- Increased access to nature: Participants realized that having more inclusive and culturally relevant programs results in underserved youth experiencing greater access to the positive benefits of outdoor programs, including the outdoor spaces within their communities.
- Greater ecological ownership: When young people of color and underserved youth participate in outdoor programs that speak to their lived realities, they feel a greater appreciation of nature, a greater sense of connection to the environmental movement (“I am welcome here”), and are more likely to take action.
- Improvements in health and well being: When youth are engaged in outdoor experiences that are both fun and readily accessible, they are more physically active, experience relief from anxiety or trauma, and develop self-care skills and confidence that serve them through life.<sup>7</sup>

Youth Outside benefited tremendously from participants’ reflections and its own internal analysis about how to improve the Cultural Relevancy Series. For example, Youth Outside will make adjustments in the schedule to allow for full assimilation of seminar learning before participants are asked to apply this to their own organizational challenges. Timing and duration of coaching can also be optimized, we will fine tune the workshop topics based on session evaluations, and the role of the microgrants merits more thoughtful consideration.

While the microgrants created the opportunity for some organizations to take on projects that they would not otherwise have pursued, this also had an unintended effect: To reinforce the impression that advancing cultural relevancy is a separate, specialized activity requiring dedicated funds, rather than a fundamental lens to be integrated into every aspect of organizational development and daily operations. Defining this phase of work as a one-off project may be counterproductive. This theme also emerged in the feedback from participants, who worried that funders’ growing interest in equity and inclusion might impact their funding patterns: Would funders reduce investment in program and service delivery in favor of cultural relevancy?

## SUCCESS STORY

The Ventana Wildlife Society had identified one clear, concrete goal for itself: To recruit Hispanic Board members, in order to better represent the community it serves. As a participant in the Cultural Relevancy Series facilitated by Youth Outside, the Ventana Wildlife Society was supported to examine how their organizational practices were preventing them from achieving their goal. They realized that they needed to start by changing their recruitment methods, which had involved outreach by their all-white Board to their existing networks, instead of outreach to community members. They moved the Board recruitment luncheon from Monterey to Salinas, where the Hispanic population is centered. They also worked with education and outreach partners rooted in the Hispanic community to identify and invite prospects. The response was overwhelming, with seventeen individuals attending the event. Ultimately, two new Hispanic leaders were added to the Board and the Ventana Wildlife Society has strengthened its connection to the Salinas community.



## SUCCESS STORY

Staff at CuriOdyssey had long been aware that the children visiting their wildlife center and learning about science through their exhibits were a fairly homogeneous group. Their goal was to engage underserved youth, understanding that transportation, daytime operating hours, and admission cost, were likely barriers. They created a travelling exhibit and partnered with the San Mateo Boys and Girls Club to bring the CuriOdyssey experience to low-income youth of color. They also made sure to send a native Spanish speaking staff member along to help interpret the exhibit. While creating the travelling exhibit was a significant undertaking, by connecting with the Boys and Girls Club, CuriOdyssey also came up with simpler strategies for working towards their goal. For example, distributing free admission vouchers through the Boys and Girls Club to their popular STEAM event, a family-friendly evening event more accessible to working parents.



As a sector, we must move away from the understanding that programs and cultural relevancy are competing priorities. The application of cultural relevancy is a core factor in determining how well we accomplish our missions. The philanthropic community is positioned to lead by example, by investing in the continued internal work of accessing trainings, resources and coaching. Integrating cultural relevancy into our grantmaking practices advances equity and inclusion efforts, and models the same process of organizational transformation grantees are being encouraged to pursue. Given these reflections, Youth Outside envisions the next iteration of the Cultural Relevancy Series as a year-long program, in which we ask participating organizations to commit to the following:

- Attend six monthly seminar sessions;
- Identify a priority area at the end of the sessions;
- Participate in five monthly coaching sessions to develop and implement a specific cultural relevancy initiative within their organizations; and
- Re-convene in the twelfth month to share progress.

Youth Outside is also acting on the recommendation to create a digital workbook for participants who have completed the Cultural Relevancy series, to support their ongoing efforts to integrate this work into organizational culture. We are also exploring potential models for offering additional trainings, for supporting peer networking and accountability, and for providing ongoing coaching.



## CONCLUSION AND VISION FOR IMPACT

Leaders in the outdoor and environmental field understand that the ability to achieve their mission depends on robust outreach and meaningful engagement. Success means including everyone. Key players are setting the tone with high profile initiatives, such as the Sierra Club's effort to transform itself into a "more equitable, inclusive, and just organization"<sup>8</sup> and the National Park Service's work through its Office of Relevancy, Diversity, and Inclusion.<sup>9</sup> These are promising signs, yet in many ways the work is only just beginning. While awareness is growing that deficiencies are systemic, the responses — however well-intentioned — have often fallen short.

Much effort to date has focused on simply increasing participant diversity, without necessarily considering the social factors and prevailing narratives that have produced the problem to begin with.<sup>10</sup> The central, underlying challenge as this work evolves and matures is to authentically incorporate social justice and inclusion. This means being open to the rather high likelihood that organizations and programs will shift and change as different conceptions, values, and experiences of both nature and education enter the mix. The tools, practices, and perspectives of cultural relevancy are essential in this regard. They invite organizations, funders, and educators into an active inquiry of privilege, power, and patterns of participation, and the ways that they shape whether, how, and which youth spend time outdoors. By making these dynamics visible, cultural relevancy creates the opportunity for change. Youth Outside is proud to offer the Cultural Relevancy Series as an important platform for this vital work.

Looking ahead, Youth Outside is committed to offering training, technical assistance, and resources for greater collaboration to achieve the following long-term outcomes:

- Improve the health of underrepresented youth by increasing access to meaningful experiences in nature. Looking at northern and central California where Youth Outside operates, health issues that disproportionately affect young people of color and underserved youth include obesity, diabetes, access to healthy food and active living, and mental health and well-being.<sup>11</sup>
- Eliminate barriers that prevent underrepresented youth from participating in outdoor programs, including barriers related to financial accessibility, transportation and cultural relevancy.
- Ensure that the outdoor and environmental workforce, including both staff and board leadership, is evolving to reflect the diverse composition of our nation. We believe that when we diversify the workforce, we invite youth and their communities to participate more fully in outdoor experiences.
- Increase the effectiveness of the environmental movement by advancing inclusion, equity, and cultural relevancy.

Youth Outside believes that the path of authentic inclusion is our best opportunity to accomplish these objectives: to mobilize a broader action base, to develop young people as active environmental stewards, and to increase the health and well-being of the communities we serve. In our vision, everyone feels welcome outside.

"I don't have to be an expert to talk with my staff and board about cultural relevancy. I have to be willing to be vulnerable and make mistakes when working on something as complex as cultural and institutional change."

— Vida Verde



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Youth Outside would like to thank all of the organizations and individuals who offered their commitment, time, and courage to participate in the Cultural Relevancy Series.

Gratitude to our generous partners at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Morgan Family Foundation for making this pilot possible, and for walking the walk through their commitment to this work. Special thanks to Ruth Barreto, Laura Rodriguez and Rena Payan for helping to tell this story.



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