



# NYCALC

Native Youth Climate Adaptation Leadership Congress

## 2024 Report



# Introduction & Background

Over the past three years of partnership with the Native Youth Climate Adaptation Leadership Congress (NYCALC), Fresh Tracks has supported the growth and leadership development of Native youth and young adults. These young adults are not only future leaders, but have already had an impact along the way, transforming the program into one that is more culturally-grounded and youth-led, with a greater emphasis on well-being.



Fresh Tracks is a program of The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. Fresh Tracks provides young Indigenous, rural, and urban diverse leaders with cross-cultural community power building, leadership development, civic engagement, and action training, rooted in the healing power of nature and culture. In 2015, Fresh Tracks was inspired by a call from President Obama for bold new programs that use the outdoors to broaden horizons for young Americans facing persistent opportunity gaps. It began with a successful pilot that took two cohorts of young adults from Los Angeles and Alaska on a shared journey from southern California to the Arctic Circle; it now supports youth and community driven action to over 200 youth movement leaders in 46 communities across 24 states. Now in its eighth year, the initiative officially joined the Forum for Community Solutions team in the spring of 2020.

The Native Youth Climate Adaptation and Leadership Congress (NYCALC) is a federal and non-governmental collaborative that invites Native communities to work together to address climate challenges in a changing environment. NYCALC provides workshops and learning opportunities in leadership principles, STEM, conservation, and outdoor skills for the next generation of Native leaders (rising high school seniors) and their communities. The Congress encourages students from different communities to collaborate on a climate change action plan. A mini-grant program provides students with resources for implementing these action plans once they return to their communities with the goal of empowering communities to address social change and conservation priorities.

NYCALC is a part of the effort by federal agencies to create meaningful relationships with Tribes by engaging and empowering the next generation of Native youth. NYCALC was created with the goal of empowering emerging high school Native youth leaders to address conservation and climate change challenges that are occurring within their home communities. The goal of the Fresh Tracks partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to be a partner in engaging, motivating, inspiring, and empowering the next generation and the generations that follow, while sharing feedback and tools that support federal partners in engaging with youth and young adult leaders from Indigenous communities.



The Big Question that this year's group of students developed projects and solutions for was:

**As Indigenous youth, how can you use the knowledge of your ancestors, elders, and family to build climate resilience?**

# Participants

Native youth initially enter the program as high school participants and develop climate and community related actions throughout the week. They have the opportunity to return in subsequent college-aged years as Junior Faculty to support this process and serve as mentors for future participants.

Fresh Tracks supports NYCALC's expanding leadership development pathway for Native college-aged Junior Faculty and trains this cohort in mentoring skills through participation in a Fresh Tracks-curated leadership development track. As a part of participation in the program, Native youth have access to continued professional development, community action grants, and the international network and opportunities available within the Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum.

This partnership is geared to support the growth of cultural competency, understanding of regional communities, communication skills, and awareness and sensitivity to different cultural beliefs from federal staff present at NYCALC.

**In total, over 115 Native youth from across the country participated in NYCALC 2024, representing the following communities:**

Akiachak Native Community	Jemez Pueblo
Alaska Native	Karuk Tribe
American Samoa	Kipnuk
Apache	Miccosukee
Aupōuri (New Zealand)	Native Village of Kipnuk
Band of Ojibwe Leech Lake	Native Villages of Tanana and Rampart
Chamorro	Navajo
Carolinian	Polynesian
Cherokee/cree	Red Cliff WI
CNMI	Rosebud Sioux Tribe
Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs	San Felipe Pueblo/Taos Pueblo
Dine/Santo Domingo	Santo Domingo Pueblo
Fijian	Séliš and pend d'Oreille
Forest County Potawatomi and Bad River Ojibwe	Shonto Chapter
Fort Bidwell Indian Community Council	Siskiyou County/Quartz Valley Indian
Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich'in Tribal Government (Fort Yukon)	Reservation/Karuk Tribe
Hawaiian	Southern Cheyenne/Arapaho
Hoopa/Scotts Band of Pomo Indian	White Earth
Hopi	Yurok Tribe
Huslia Tribe	Ngāti porou, Te aupōuri (New Zealand)
Inupiaq	
Isleta Pueblo	

# Trainer Team Bios



**Kainoa Azama (he/him)** is a Kānaka Maoli from He ' e ' ia, O ' ahu, Hawai ' i, who was inspired by the forward thinking of elders in his community to restore traditional agricultural practices, prevent overdevelopment, and maintain traditional wisdom. Kainoa is dedicated to the intergenerational transfer of knowledge to usher in a thriving society rooted in a culture of continuity. Kainoa is currently a part of the Rising Voices Center for Indigenous and Earth Sciences, a part of NCAR, UCAR, and NOAA, a recognized Earth Ambassador for UNITY, the current President of the Associated Students of the University of Hawai ' i at Mānoa, a member of O ' ahu Water Protectors, and a Director of the Ko ' olaupoko Hawaiïan Civic Club, amongst many other responsibilities to the community. An ' ōlelo no ' eau which inspires him is, "He wa ' a he moku, He Moku He Wa ' a, (an island is a canoe and a canoe is an island)" a reminder of the need for relationality with ourselves and each other, as well as with the family that is the natural world, in order for us to make the distance on our voyage on this canoe known as island Earth.



**Talia Davis (she/her)** is Tlingit from the village of Kake, Alaska. After witnessing how logging affected every aspect of the environment that raised her, Talia was inspired to learn more about Western environmental sciences to supplement the Indigenous Knowledge that she already carries. She attended the University of Alaska Fairbanks and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Fisheries and Ocean Sciences. During her time as an undergrad, Talia researched the effects of climate change and pollutants on salmon, shellfish, and other traditional foods that her people depend upon.

After graduating, Talia moved to Oregon and became a RAY Conservation Diversity Fellow where she worked at NOAA Fisheries for two years. She is now in a biology graduate program at Oregon State University where she uses artificial intelligence to help her study freshwater plankton. Talia believes that stewardship of the air, land, and sea is inherently connected to Native people, and that all Indigenous peoples have a right to manage and protect the resources that have supported their people since time immemorial. When she's not looking at photos of copepods on her computer, you can find Talia practicing her roller skating skills or beading.



**Pearson Denny (he/him)** proudly represents the Menominee Nation, hailing from Keshena, Wisconsin. Currently, he is a dedicated student athlete pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Here, he excels as a member of the men's volleyball team.

Upon graduating from high school, Pearson not only earned his diploma but also attained an associate's degree in Liberal Arts. This showcased his commitment to academic excellence. His passion for higher education is deeply rooted in his desire to break cycles within his community and serve as a source of inspiration for the next generation.

Pearson's dedication to preserving his Tribal language is evident in his participation in Menominee yoU's language boot camp last summer. Additionally, he competed in the North American Indigenous Games as a member of the men's baseball team, earning the silver medal. Beyond his athletic achievements, Pearson endeavors to serve as a role model for youth, not only in sports but also in preserving and promoting cultural heritage. He is excited to represent the Menominee people on the Fresh Tracks Team!



**Joey Gonzales (he/him)** is a California Native born and raised from Los Angeles county representing his Tribal identity (chumash/tataviam) and chicano identity. Joey has a strong passion for acting, modeling, poetry, film-making, and content creating. Joey is also a strong advocate for mental health and wellness. Joey hopes to use his creativity and talents to bring entertainment to the world while advocating for mental well-being and representing his communities on screen and off.

Currently Joey is stepping into his creativity more, sharing his talents with the world through poetry, vlogging, content creation, acting, and modeling. He is also going through training to become a community organizer. He hopes to use his training to advocate for his community in the film industry.

Joey has spoken on the mental health panel at the White House Tribal Youth Forum, sharing struggles he has faced in the film industry while also including mental health resources for Native youth to use in times of struggle. He has also traveled to Mombasa, Kenya for the Global Convening to represent his Native American/Chicano heritage.

While writing poetry, content creating, and modeling, Joey also enjoys exploring nature, traveling and meditation.



**Steve Harvey (he/him)** is a proud member of the San Carlos Apache Tribe in Arizona. He embodies the spirit of the Red Band People and The Rock Strung Into Willow's People clan. Steve is a dedicated student, currently pursuing a dual-enrollment at Eastern Arizona and the University of Arizona. His academic journey is focused on social sciences and psychology, with a unique aspiration to bridge Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. His goal is to introduce an Indigenous perspective to analyze his community's history, society, and culture.

Steve is not just an employee, but an empathetic advocate for the San Carlos Apache Tribe. Working closely with his Tribal social services department has given him a firsthand understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities that Indigenous communities face today. Through his work, he has gained a deeper appreciation for the importance of cooperation and coordination between Tribal governments and state and federal agencies. He has also developed a greater understanding of the complexities of the Indian Child Welfare Act and the particular challenges that Indigenous children in the foster care system must overcome, showcasing his insightful empathy.

Steve has also served two terms on the United National Indian Tribal Youth Inc. Executive Committee, representing over 65 affiliated youth councils and serving on the 2020-2021 Earth Ambassadors cohort. In Steve's free time, he enjoys playing volleyball with his friends and traveling to tournaments.



**Sage Innerarity (she/her)** is a citizen of the Lone Band of Miwok Indians from Elk Grove, California. She received her Bachelor's Degree from Amherst College in English and American Studies with concentration in Native American Studies. Sage was recommended for summa cum laude and graduated magna cum laude for her thesis "Stealing the Fire: (Re)claiming, (Re)telling, and (Re)covering Miwok Creation Stories and Oral Histories," which centered Miwok creation stories, Tribal histories, and family histories as a way of rewriting California history. Sage is currently a graduate student at Simmons University pursuing her MS in Library and Information Science with concentration in Cultural Heritage Informatics. During her first semester, she served as a graduate intern for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Archives, where she processed an oversized maps collection and contributed to grant research. This summer, she will serve as a Peabody Essex Museum Native American Fellow in the Phillips Library.

Sage is a 2023 Native Americans in Philanthropy Native Youth Grantmaker with sponsorship from the Miwok Heritage Center. She is also a 2023-2025 ARL Kaleidoscope Program Scholar and a 2023 ALA Spectrum Scholar. Sage is deeply committed to cultural revitalization efforts in her Tribal community. In addition to working as a researcher and interviewer with the Miwok Heritage Center, she is involved in designing and co-teaching language courses for Miwok youth as well as learning basket weaving with her mother and sister. In her free time, she enjoys writing, making jewelry, and spending time outside.



**Kianna Pete (she/her)** is a Diné scholar, advocate, and education and policy researcher from New Mexico. She works with Indigenous public health and environmental organizations, scientists, educators, organizers, legal professionals, and other researchers across Turtle Island to promote Indigenous self-determination and educational equity. Guided by Diné teachings, Kianna aims to respectfully bridge collective knowledge to advocate for equitable education for and about Indigenous peoples. She educates about socio-political topics affecting Indigenous communities through her digital content writing, social justice curriculum development at Start:Empowerment, and research at the American Institutes for Research.

Kianna is a graduate student at Teachers College, Columbia University studying politics and education. At Columbia, she is an Arthur Zankel Fellow where she assists in teaching place-based civil rights history in Harlem, NY and is a research assistant for the Center for Educational Equity advocating for children's education rights. She has previously worked with the Newcomb Navajo Nation Chapter, NM District 3 Congressional Office, Research for Indigenous Social Action & Equity Center at the University of Michigan, and the Association on American Indian Affairs. She earned her BA in Political Science and Ethnicity & Race Studies specializing in Indigenous/Native Studies at Columbia University.



**McKaylin Peters (she/her)** is a citizen of the Menominee Nation from Keshena, Wisconsin. Raised on the Menominee Reservation, McKaylin now resides in Madison, Wisconsin. Currently pursuing her undergraduate degree as a PEOPLE scholar in Community & Non-profit Leadership (B.S) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she is involved in the Earth Partnership Fellowship as a fellow, focusing on incorporating Menominee language into mental health resources and promoting language representation in the community. McKaylin also takes on the role of the Indigenous Student Programming Intern at the Multicultural Student Center. Her internship gives her the role of a Cultural Organizer United and Strengthening Indigenous Networks (COUSIN) that falls under the NDGNS fellowship.

Her dedication to serving her community, particularly the youth, is evident through her work, advocacy, and studies. Recognizing the importance of guidance for the youth, McKaylin seeks to be a beacon of support, drawing from her own experiences of mentorship and community. She feels blessed to have found a nurturing community early in life and is committed to sharing that sense of belonging with others. McKaylin is a 2023 Native Youth Grantmaker which is housed under Native Americans in Philanthropy and is sponsored by her tribe. McKaylin's participation in the Native Youth Grantmakers Program was an opportunity to further empower her community and gain insights into affecting meaningful change. She is honored to represent the Menominee people on the Fresh Tracks Team!





**Liz Riley (she/ her)** is a native New Mexican, born and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She hails from the Navajo, Oneida, Laguna Pueblo, and Jemez Pueblo. Her lifelong passion has been to better integrate Indigenous environmental knowledge into environmental science and conservation efforts. Another passion of hers is helping Indigenous peoples reconnect and rebuild the relationship to their language, culture and tradition, essentially a cultural and even spiritual reconnection.

She is currently a student at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico and is working towards a Bachelors of Science in Environmental Science and a minor in Native American Studies.

She is a proud titleholder of the Miss Native American New Mexico State University of the year 2022 to 2023 and helps mentor the women who have come into the same title after her, guiding them through what it means to be an ambassador for their communities and Indigenous students on campus. During her year-long commitment to the title, she advocated for environmental awareness and environmental education on Tribal lands. In the future, she hopes to serve in other ambassador titles such as Miss Indian New Mexico or Miss Native American USA, and number one on her bucket list is running for the Miss Indian World title.

Liz has been part of NYCALC since 2018, coming to the program as a high school rising junior then as Junior Faculty in 2022 and 2023. Now, she returns as a Fresh Tracks Trainer for NYCALC 2024.

# Trainer Team Roles & Responsibilities

The 2024 Fresh Tracks Trainer Team had 9 team members, a mix of Indigenous young adults who served as Trainers for the 2023 NYCALC and new additions to the team, including leaders from a collaboration with Native Americans in Philanthropy and their Native Youth Grantmakers program. Fresh Tracks operates with a peer mentor model where young leaders participate and learn one year, and return as mentors to another group of leaders the following year.

In preparation for the 2024 Congress, the Trainer Team met regularly to review the curriculum, determine roles, and set goals for engaging with the Junior Faculty during the week. They were introduced to training on facilitation, healing, leadership development, and developing a narrative for change.

Workshops for NYCALC came out of the Fresh Tracks Toolkit, designed in part by the NYCALC 2022 Trainer Team. This toolkit for action is available for other young leaders to use to spark connection and action in their communities. This toolkit includes an overview of the full curriculum, activities, strategies for action, and examples of ways Fresh Tracks leaders have already taken action.

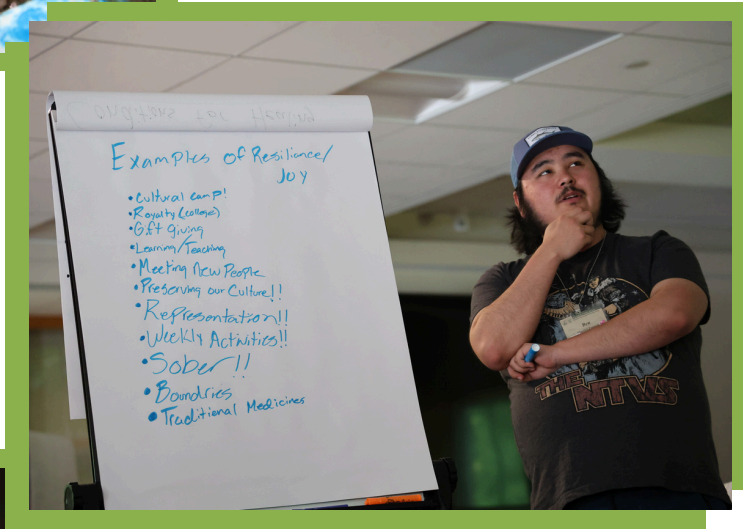


During the NYCALC week, the Trainer Team primarily served as mentors to the college-aged Junior Faculty, facilitating workshops and sessions designed to give young leaders space for connection and healing, add to their arsenal of skills, boost their leadership development, and bring growth to their community. They also facilitated a healing talking circle where the young leaders were able to express personal and community issues and experience support of their peers.

Trainer actions and responsibilities included:

- Building relationships with NYCALC Junior Faculty and participants
- Leading connection sessions
- Leading workshops on Healing, Reclaiming Your Story, and Two-Eyed Seeing
- Representing Fresh Tracks and NYCALC as positive role models
- Representing their culture by contributing during Culture Night
- Serving as a mentor by sharing personal experiences and their developing career journeys on various panels





## Highlight: A Leader From The Start

A core value of Fresh Tracks is the idea that young adults should have opportunities for leadership and advancement. This value is exercised by paying young leaders and being intentional about creating opportunities to hire them as internal program staff.

Andrea Wagner began her connection with Fresh Tracks as a Trainer Team member in the 2021 virtual NYCALC. A few months after serving as a mentor for the participants, she was hired for a part-time position as Program Associate on the Fresh Tracks team.

Over the past three years, Andrea has not only advanced to become a full-time staff member of the Fresh Tracks team, she now leads the NYCALC Trainer Team program and all programming for the entire network. The many examples of leadership in her path so far include a plenary talk at the Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum on young adult well-being, facilitating youth and young adult connection globally at the Opportunity Youth Convening in Mombasa, Kenya, and leading a delegation of youth at the White House Youth Policy Forum.

Her growth and leadership is firm evidence of what happens when youth and young adults are invested in, trained, and supported as key decision makers.

***“The challenges that youth face are challenges youth are informed to solve.”***  
- Andrea Wagner



# Highlight: Creating Pathways for Leaders

Liz Riley began her leadership journey as a NYCALC participant in 2018. She was able to return as a Junior Faculty member in 2022 and 2023 and contribute as a mentor to the high school participants. Returning this year as a member of the Fresh Tracks Trainer Team marked a new level in her leadership development.

She says, “Normally I don’t know if I have a lot of impact on people, but having young leaders say that I had an influence on them wanting to come back gave me a reminder that the things I do and the work I put in makes a difference. I want to keep doing that, and the Trainer Team gives me an opportunity to continue that work.”

***“For me, it’s a whole new plane of development. Andrea pushed me on my leadership and public speaking skills, and this year I feel more comfortable and elevated in those skills. I had the chance to watch the trainers from the outside as Junior Faculty the past two years and didn’t know how much development I would get from the experience.”***

— Liz Riley

As the partnership with NYCALC continues to grow, Fresh Tracks hopes to continue to provide opportunities for participants like Liz who join as high school students to develop as leaders both inside and outside of the program.



## Highlight: Opportunities to Lead

Talia Davis is Tlingit from the village of Kake, Alaska. She is a Fresh Tracks Trainer and a graduate student studying freshwater plankton at Oregon State University. After witnessing how logging affected every aspect of the environment that raised her, Talia was inspired to learn more about Western environmental sciences to supplement the Indigenous Knowledge that she already carries. She attended the University of Alaska Fairbanks and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Fisheries and Ocean Sciences.

Talia believes that stewardship of the air, land, and sea is inherently connected to Native people, and that all Indigenous peoples have a right to manage and protect the resources that have supported their people since time immemorial.

As a part of her role in Fresh Tracks, Talia had the opportunity to moderate a fireside chat with Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland at [Aspen Ideas: Climate](#) in Miami Beach, Florida. Talia's questions to the Secretary highlighted the invaluable wisdom of Indigenous practices and how they can complement and enhance western scientific approaches. They also advocated for small and remote Indigenous communities' well-being and impact to be centered in plans for clean energy.



*The main thing that I learned coming out of NYCALC last year is that I was not alone. At times, I have felt a little disconnected from my community, but through experiences students shared at NYCALC, I learned ideas for how to connect to my community even when I'm away, as well as how to find my people and create my own kinds of communities.*

— Talia Davis

# Highlight: Trainer–Sparked Change and Cultural Relevance

During NYCALC 2022, Junior Faculty and Trainer Team members spoke up and advocated for more youth leadership and voice in the planning and leadership of the Congress. NYCALC leadership responded by having Trainer Team members on the Core Planning Team and incorporating a youth/Junior Faculty advisory group into the planning and decision-making process.

During NYCALC 2023, a member of the Trainer Team advocated for high school participants from different communities to be able to share their culture and practice cultural protocol for entering into a space or beginning a session. This seemingly small change was profoundly impactful for the students, incorporating a level of depth, connection, and cross-cultural learning that the Congress had not yet seen.

In preparation for NYCALC 2023, the Fresh Tracks team adapted and developed a Guide to Cultural Awareness as a tool the organizers could use to support the education and cultural growth of federal staff and partners. This tool was incorporated into the pre-Congress training.





# Highlight: Open Space Technology with a Cultural Foundation

Open Space Technology (OST) is a brainstorming and facilitation tool used to generate multiple ideas and then narrow them down to those that resonate the strongest. OST is the central tool used to support students answering The Big Question for NYCALC and giving them categories for their presentations at the end of the week.

This year, OST was led by Trainers Kainoa and Liz, rather than adult staff as in previous years. Their leadership brought an update to the usual program, grounding participants in culturally relevant stories of connection to nature. They then had students break out into small groups to share their own stories from their communities and cultures before addressing the question of what actions they could take against climate change.



# Highlight: Native Youth Grantmakers and Fresh Tracks Partnership

Over the past year, Fresh Tracks has grown in partnership with Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) with an aligned intention on increasing tools and access to leadership for Native youth. In November 2023, a partnership between Fresh Tracks and Native Youth Grantmakers supported a joint delegation of Native youth leaders to join the 2023 White House Tribal Youth Forum. In April 2024, both groups partnered again to lead a panel discussion entitled Empowering Indigenous Youth: Uniting Native Youth to Shape Policy and Philanthropy at the NAP Annual Conference. During NYCALC, the cross-pollination continued with Native Youth Grantmakers serving as a part of the Fresh Tracks Trainer Team.



# Highlight: Culture Night

Fresh Tracks strongly believes in the importance of intentional cross-cultural connection; we can celebrate and learn from our differences in culture, and build bonds over the things we have in common. As a part of the week, NYCALC hosted a night where Native youth from over 15 different communities shared elements of their culture including dances, songs, stories, games, and playing instruments.

Culture Night is the culmination of NYCALC. Indigenous youth from around the world get to share and display their cultures with other students who may not have the opportunity to travel to these diverse communities. Students, representing their communities, were able to share commonalities between cultures while also being enriched and enlightened with the differences between them. Culture Night is a night for knowledge sharing, community building and connection. Members of the Trainer Team even exchanged clothing and earrings with youth from other Tribes and communities.

## Members of the Fresh Tracks Trainer Team participated in Culture Night as well:

- Kainoa Azama sang with the youth from the islands of Hawaii and American Samoa.
- Talia Davis and Andrea Wagner danced with Ben Hunter-Francis II to a song to honor his late uncle.
- Liz Riley, McKaylin Peters, Kianna Pete and Pearson Denny joined a community sidestep dance with youth from the Midwest/Southwest.



# Impact

Over the three years of partnership, Fresh Tracks has supported the Native Youth Climate Adaptation Leadership Congress (NYCALC) in the development of college-aged Native young adults, who are often called “future leaders.”

Our role is to provide them with mentorship, resources, and learning from a past that they have not experienced, for them to use all that as tools in shaping a tomorrow that they will live in and we may not get to see. But all that is not in the future. These leaders, as evidenced through these brief examples, have created change today.

## Since its inception, this program has:

- Trained 60 college-aged young adults as mentors for the NYCALC program
- Developed a curriculum that includes workshops on Healing, Reclaiming Your Story, and Two-Eyed Seeing
- Advocated for and included cultural protocol in NYCALC programming
- Integrated additional emphasis on mental health and well-being
- Adapted the Open Space Technology tool to include more cultural grounding



***If you don't feel like you have a place, you'll find a place. People will make space for you. This is a Native space. Everyone comes as strangers and leaves as family. When you come here, you're not going to leave as the same person and will carry away so many positive memories.***

— Liz Riley

# Partner Acknowledgment

The actions of Fresh Tracks are made possible with the support of our partners at The REI Cooperative Action Fund, The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The 11th Hour Project, Teeline Foundation, Tides Foundation, The JPB Foundation, The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, the Andrus Family Fund, the National Recreation Foundation, and the network of youth and young adult Fresh Tracks leaders across the country who make Fresh Tracks a community of action and positive change.

Since time immemorial, Native communities across the Americas have demonstrated resilience and resistance in the face of violent efforts to separate them from their land, culture, and each other. Indigenous people remain at the forefront of movements for justice, equity, the protection of nature and the life it sustains. Fresh Tracks is aware that we walk, support, and work on Native land. Native American communities continue to thrive and lead the movements for human rights today. The Fresh Tracks team acknowledges the critical and necessary step to honor Native communities and their leadership to build an equitable future for all. Fresh Tracks encourages all to uncover truths of the original inhabitants of the land we all walk on.

