

Tahoe Fund fostering next generation of leaders

Different programs introduce youth to the outdoors, inspiring a lifelong appreciation of the wild

By Jessica Weaver
TAHOE FUND

For those who regularly spend time recreating outdoors, it surely comes as no surprise that there are numerous benefits to our bodies, minds, and souls. In fact, Harvard Health reports spending time outside teaches us important life skills, including how to plan, prioritize, troubleshoot, negotiate, and multi-task. It also lets us—and in particular, children—explore their creativity, get exercise, learn how to socialize, and develop the confidence and bravery needed to take risks that we encounter in life.

Claire McCarthy, senior faculty editor at Harvard Health Publishing and author of an article outlining the reasons children need to play outside, says spending time outdoors also gives children an appreciation of nature. “If a child grows up never walking in the woods, digging in the soil, seeing animals in their habitat, climbing a mountain, playing in a stream, or staring at the endless horizon of an ocean, they may never really understand what there is to be lost. The future of our planet depends on our children; they need to learn to appreciate it,” she said.

“Statistics show that those who were not exposed to outdoor recreation as kids are less likely to participate as adults,” said Amy Berry, Tahoe Fund CEO. “That’s why the Tahoe Fund continues to partner with organizations who help us fulfill our mission and break down barriers to access. This is how we’ll build the next generation of stewards who will love and care for the Tahoe environment for years to come.”

Building the next generation of leaders

When you pair immersive outdoor and academic programs with opportunities to develop observation, writing, and public-speaking skills, you create the next generation of leaders. That’s what the Adventure Risk Challenge (ARC) program is doing to transform the lives of high school students in the Lake Tahoe area who might not otherwise have the opportunity.

The two-year Community Leadership program inspires confidence in participants through 60 hours of in-school leadership workshops, eight outdoor weekend adventures, and a



Photos: Tahoe Fund

Participants in the Adventure Risk Challenge (top photo and lower left) learn leadership skills through workshops and adventures. High schoolers in the Generation Green program (lower right) enjoy an eight-week work-study program that includes a backpacking trip.

34-day summer course spent recreating in the Tahoe Basin. During this immersive summer course, participants learn Leave No Trace principles, get an introduction to Sierra flora and fauna, and, most importantly, develop leadership skills while gaining a deep appreciation of wild places. The goals of ARC are well aligned with those of the Tahoe Fund and are why the organization has contributed more than \$60,000 to the program over the past several years and will continue to do so into the future.

Providing an inclusive environment

Feeling welcome in the outdoors is not a given for all young people in the Tahoe Basin. Opportunities like Gateway Mountain Center’s Youth Ecology and Adventure Camps (YEA! Camps) make all the difference, especially for youth who don’t have access to all the wonders the outdoors has to offer.

Thanks to donor support, YEA! Camps are a free program for high-risk Tahoe

youth to help them overcome adversity and develop crucial life skills such as adaptability, communication, and empowerment through outdoor adventure and mindfulness lessons. The camps help young people build a strong connection to themselves, their community, and the natural world, all while learning how to become environmental stewards. The Tahoe Fund has provided \$60,000 to support this program.

At Camp Wamp, outdoor experiences are made possible for kids with physical disabilities. This unique sleepaway summer camp teaches kids about self-reliance and their own ambition as they sleep outdoors on cots under the stars and participate in activities including fishing, hiking, arts, crafts, and more. The Tahoe Fund and Camp Wamp will give campers a unique experience on the shore of Lake Tahoe. The Tahoe Fund raised over \$41,000 to cover the costs to transport the campers and counselors in each weekly session to the universally

accessible Tahoe East Shore Trail and Sand Harbor State Park.

Creating a pathway to careers in the outdoors

Combining hands-on learning opportunities and work can inspire a lifelong love of the environment. That’s the model of Generation Green, an eight-week work-study program for local high school students run by the USDA Forest Service.

Over the past 10 years, 171 kids have successfully completed the program. Of those, 95 percent continued on to higher education. Four graduates are now Forest Service employees and 19 are temporary employees with the Forest Service and other natural resource agencies.

“The Tahoe Fund has proudly supported the Generation Green program with nearly \$120,000 in funding since 2014. It’s incredible to see some of the graduates continue on to careers with the Forest Service and other agencies that work on behalf of the environment, and all of them develop a deep passion for environmental stewardship. This is exactly what Tahoe needs,” said Berry.

Getting kids outside

To create a life-long love for the outdoors, kids need opportunities to play and explore. According to the Trust for Public Land, 100 million people in America—including 28 million kids—don’t have a park within a 10-minute walk of home. This is exemplified in the Ski Run neighborhood in South Lake Tahoe, where there is no park access for more than a thousand kids who call the neighborhood home.

To remedy this, the nonprofit Friends of Ski Run is transforming an empty lot into Ski Run Community Park, a new place for kids and families in the neighborhood to enjoy.

It won’t just be a place to gather and play—park-goers will have the opportunity to participate in workshops on exercise, health, and nutrition. The Tahoe Fund is currently running a \$100,000 matching campaign to help bring the park to life, with every donation doubled until the goal is met. Visit tahoefund.org to contribute. For more information on Ski Run Park, see page 21. ♦

Jessica Weaver is a writer for the Tahoe Fund.