

SEEDS EcoCorps trains the next generation of green workers

By Sally Barber Special to the Record-Eagle Feb 26, 2023

TRAVERSE CITY — Thanks to the Traverse City-based SEEDS-EcoCorps, more than 575 youth since 2009 have been a part of a green-collar workforce learning the skills and opportunities involved in environmental careers.

EcoCorps, a nonprofit program of SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers, provides outdoor career exploration through paid work experiences. EcoCorps projects include miles of North Country Trail maintenance and construction in cooperation with several NCT chapters.

EcoCorps program director Jennifer Flynn received The North Country Trail Association's 2022 Friend of the Trail Award for leadership benefiting northern Michigan sections of the eight-state footpath.

"Flynn has done a lot of work to cultivate relationships with organizations and connecting more people to the trail, which is a Michigan gem," said Elizabeth Dunham, SEEDS outreach coordinator.

Rapid City high school senior Petra Foote spent the past two summers as member of Flynn's EcoCorps crew. In 2022, she served with a crew constructing a boardwalk along a Mesick NCT segment. The project involved carrying 2-by-4 and 2-by-6 lumber across miles of rugged terrain.

"One of our crew leaders told us we would be in the best shape of our lives after," Foote said. "He was right."

EcoCorps employs as many as 50 young people 16 and older during fair weather seasons. Youth gain skills through a variety of hands-on projects providing on-the-ground solutions.

"They are learning trail design, sustainable construction, while working with the North Country Trail and how to engage with the crew, hikers, bikers and other trail users," Flynn said.

The paid work experience also offers EcoCorps crew opportunities to work with professionals in the field. "They have eye-opening experiences during the time they work with us," Flynn said.

In addition to NCT chapters, EcoCorps works with several public and private sector partners, including the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service and the region's land conservancies. Partnerships also engage crew in a spectrum of community projects, including compost management at Oryana Community Co-Op, management of the the downtown Sara Hardy's Farmers Market, and the Giving Garden at Historic Barns Park. Since established, EcoCorps has provided ongoing service to Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. The crew most recently cleared trees from park trails.

Among 2023 projects is a waste management program, tree rescue to maintain carbon sequestration, habitat restoration and reforestation for private property owners.

Flynn said the green-collar program funded by grants and donations helps young people expand ideas regarding career paths. It links traditional careers such as engineering, to jobs supporting sustainability and healthy ecosystems. She said that because of their experience, park and forest service agencies and related organizations seek EcoCorps members for employment.

SEEDS training benefits society by supporting feed the green worker pipeline a wide range of occupation choices in science, construction, electrical trades, agriculture, community development, the media and arts.

“We’re facing challenges across our communities to create resiliency in land and social systems,” Flynn said. “People of all ages are more aware of the need to support each other and the eco-communities in which we live.”

Those 16 and older from Traverse City, Benzie, Manistee, and other parts of northwest Michigan are eligible to apply for EcoCorps positions. Learn more and watch for seasonal job openings at ecoseeds.applicantpool.com/jobs/.