We believe that our job at the Grand Canyon Trust is to do much more than appreciate the next generation. We are committed to training and empowering, listening to and learning from them. From our Rising Leaders program, to the work of the Colorado Plateau Uplift team, from our internship efforts, to our volunteer program, we engage emerging conservationists. This generation is our future.

This inaugural issue of the Grand Canyon Trust’s Impact Report shares inspirational stories from and about our next generation of conservation leaders. We dedicate this issue to them. To those that will inherit the legacy of our best ideals and most tragic shortcomings. And especially to those whose sheer force of will and inspired advocacy will heal wounds, and leave the world more just, more beautiful, and more sane. My daughters, and everyone’s children, deserve this hope and this possibility.

Ethan Aumack
Executive Director
This past summer, a group of seven young people stood between Canyon Mine and Red Butte, the birthplace of the Havasupai people. As they looked out on this sacred place, Havasupai elder Coleen Kaska called for an end to uranium mining on her homelands. “Are they going to listen to us?” she asked. “All we want is protection for our waters.”

This was the first annual LeaderShift, a week-long experiential workshop focused on the toxic legacy of uranium mining on the Colorado Plateau. The Trust’s Rising Leaders Program created LeaderShift to equip young people with hands-on environmental justice and advocacy experience.

85

Young people participated in trainings and workshops.

Following the path of uranium ore from Canyon Mine to White Mesa Mill, this summer’s workshop participants met with community members to understand the devastating implications of uranium extraction and environmental injustice on their homelands. They listened to the teachings of Indigenous leaders like Coleen Kaska, Sarana Riggs, and Yolanda Badback, matriarchs of the Havasupai, Navajo, and Ute Mountain Ute peoples, who have been leading a generations-long fight to protect their communities from resource extraction. Alongside these elders, experienced activists, storytellers, artists, and scientists, the group examined how regional environmental issues are connected and explored strategies for personal and political change.

The Trust believes programs like LeaderShift instill youth with the resilience and creativity necessary to solve unprecedented environmental problems. This summer’s LeaderShift participants are just a few of the 85 Rising Leaders who have participated in service learning trips, advocacy training, and internships, to prepare a generation of conservationists for work on the plateau.
Five years ago in a historic cabin at the Trust’s Kane Ranch near the Grand Canyon, young climate activists gathered in a circle around oil lamps to share stories of environmental and social injustice on the Colorado Plateau. At that first retreat, the Grand Canyon Trust’s climate justice conference, Uplift, was born, with a mission to connect, train, and mobilize young people for climate justice across the Colorado Plateau and greater Southwest.

Since then, Uplift has evolved from a single conference to a transformative movement for young climate activists. Across the Southwest, Uplift has become the primary vehicle to convene and mobilize young people acting for climate justice. In its short tenure, Uplift has hired 40 organizing fellows, hosted five climate conferences, and empowered over 1,000 young people. Uplift’s organizers bring fresh perspectives to influential organizations and campaigns—from advocating at the U.N. Climate Conference and leading the movement to protect Bears Ears National Monument, to organizing the Latinx community to help support Utah’s wildlands. In its work, Uplift has garnered national attention: earlier this year, Teen Vogue listed it as one of “Five Youth-Led Climate Justice Groups Helping to Save the Environment.”

The Trust helped foster Uplift from an idea to a movement, and is proud to see Uplift transition to become its own organization. With fiscal sponsorship from Social and Environmental Entrepreneurs, Uplift will continue to grow, raise funds, and utilize direct action and grassroots organization, in order to build a strong movement for climate justice.

“Uplift provides me with enduring hope for my generation’s future. Going forward, I know we will create an unstoppable force that shifts the narrative of what’s politically possible on the Colorado Plateau. We will work alongside our grassroots partners to inspire a movement that ends extraction and creates a regenerative, renewable, and equitable society.”

—Brooke Larsen, Uplift Coordinator
As the 2019 centennial anniversary of Grand Canyon National Park (GCNP) comes to a close, the Trust is working more closely than ever with Native communities of the Colorado Plateau. With Tribal communities taking the lead, the Trust’s Grand Canyon Program aims to heal and build relationships to ensure a shared future for the park’s next 100 years that celebrates Native voices, heritage, and communities.

Jack Pongyesva, a 28-year old emerging Hopi leader, entrepreneur, and environmental advocate, personifies this effort. As an intern at the Grand Canyon Trust in 2017, Jack researched the Navajo Nation’s shift away from a coal-based economy and felt “a strong sense of hope that we can put aside our differences and work toward a future where Colorado Plateau communities can survive and thrive without coal.”

Today, Jack plays a vital role to ensure plateau communities thrive economically through community-based businesses. While unrelenting economic pressures to develop tourist-centric commercial services threaten the meaning of the Grand Canyon as a place of great spiritual significance for tribal communities, the Trust is working with Jack and others to change that narrative. Over 40 tribal members have joined efforts to recommend Native-led economic development, inclusive management of public lands, and a deeper understanding of Native perspectives with partner institutions like GCNP.

The commitment of the Trust’s past interns to become emerging leaders, like Jack, and to lead dynamic initiatives for conservation on the plateau is vital to our work now and in the future.
In 2013, the Grand Canyon Trust Native America program founded Change Labs, a business incubator to enhance regional economic opportunity by supporting local entrepreneurs on tribal land, where $400 billion dollars of annual tax revenue is estimated to be lost to businesses in bordering towns. Since then, it has graduated 18 businesses ranging from food service to tourism, equipment repair, and traditional arts and crafts, and is meeting the need for goods and services in Native communities.

With Change Labs’ assistance, a member of this year’s cohort, Tyrone Thompson, will position Chi’shie Farms within the regional agricultural industry to provide technical assistance in farming. His dream is to achieve a shift in the region’s food supply, making locally-grown produce more available. Soon, produce from Chi’shie Farms could be on the shelves of fellow Change Labs graduate Germaine Simonson’s store, Rocky Ridge Gas and Grocery, where she is selling quality groceries, gasoline, and creating a central gathering place for her community.

Carlos Deal, another Change Labs graduate, is considering the possibility of serving local produce from his food truck in Tuba City, Arizona. After working for 5 years as a sushi chef following graduation from culinary school, Deal founded AlterNativEats to provide local sushi to customers on the Navajo Nation.

Like Tyrone, Germaine and Carlos, all the entrepreneurs in the Change Labs community are redefining local economies by starting businesses that serve local needs and conserve cultural traditions, landscapes, and a future of opportunity for the next generation.
This year has been an important turning point for justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion (JEDI) efforts at Grand Canyon Trust. The longstanding approach to conservation has been informed by colonial systems that have actively excluded many identities—predominantly those people most affected by environmental injustice. The Trust recognizes that our work can be strengthened through prioritizing diverse perspectives, and beyond the many strategic reasons why JEDI is imperative to our mission, we also recognize that it is simply the right thing to do.

At the heart of our efforts, we are working to implement equity into our operations to ensure staff and partners have access to equal opportunity inside and outside our organization. Our focus on intersectional collaboration is ongoing, but also demonstrated by initiatives ranging from collective storytelling, like through community murals, to supporting resilient local economies in Native communities.

Last January, the Trust formed a committee of ten staff members to examine and update our core values statement, conflict management policy, discrimination and harassment policy, and craft the Trust’s first-ever Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement. This fall, the Board of Trustees has made their own commitment to JEDI by forming an eight-member sub-committee to support this work.

Through our JEDI goals that will guide the Trust’s work, culture, and ethics through actionable steps, we are holding ourselves accountable, while challenging our ways of thinking about conservation, and creating space for unheard stories.

The Grand Canyon Trust’s commitment from our board and staff to make justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion synonymous with conservation contributes to an ever-growing movement of change-making organizations. This work is an ongoing and humble undertaking, and its integration into our everyday work is long overdue.

—Chelsea Griffin, JEDI Manager

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—Chelsea Griffin, JEDI Manager
A Deep and Profound Commitment, Continued

Over the course of my now-long career, I have been absolutely stunned by the extent and quality of the contributions made by young lawyers on critical conservation and tribal matters.

When I joined the law faculty at the University of Oregon in 1975, I was taken aback by the students’ powerful interest in these fields. This was just at the beginning, after all, of modern environmental law—Earth Day and National Environmental Policy Act had both been launched just five years before. “Environmental lawyer” had just recently entered the national vocabulary. Indian Law, ignored for so long, was exploding and “tribal sovereignty” was itself part of public discourse, especially in the West. After graduating, many of these students went into these fields, mostly in the Pacific Northwest.

In 1987, I moved to the University of Colorado Law School and found even more students committed to conservation and tribal work, a trend evident as well at Oregon and other schools. Fellow faculty (and long-time Grand Canyon Trust board members) David Getches and Sarah Krakoff and I reveled as well at Oregon and other schools. Fellow faculty (and long-time Grand Canyon Trust board members) David Getches and Sarah Krakoff and I reveled in our relationships with students in the classroom and during vigorous office discussions about classes, job possibilities, and changing the world. These young people were so determined, knowledgeable, and articulate! The three of us often talked about all the information and inspiration our students gave us. After graduation, a large and steady stream of students moved into conservation and tribal work and became energetic and creative leaders, mostly in the Southwest and often on the Colorado Plateau, with several serving as staff members at the Grand Canyon Trust.

The Colorado Plateau is and will be in good hands under this new and exceptional generation. They are numerous and the cultural diversity is strong and increasing. They represent an uncountable number of disciplines and perspectives. They know more than we do about international affairs, which provides valuable issues and context to the work here. Most of all, there is no doubt that they, as we do, feel a deep and profound commitment to this dry, rocky, scratchy, often hard-to-access—but everlastingly sacred—red rock landscape.

My best,
Charles Wilkinson
Grand Canyon Trust Trustee
CARBON NEUTRAL BY 2030