

## Community Catalyst

# JOURNEY MAP



## "Seattle Youth Climate Action Network"

Woodland Park Zoo

Seattle, WA

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Over the past four years, Woodland Park Zoo has led the **Seattle Youth Climate Action Network** (Seattle Youth CAN or SYCAN), a regional collective impact program to empower teens from the greater Seattle area to address climate change.

Having undergone multiple stages of evolution and transformation and overcome significant hurdles, the project has sparked a wave of energy, learning and power shifts among staff and an ever-widening network of community partners and activated youth in the Seattle region.

While initially focused on participants from Woodland Park Zoo, Pacific Science Center and Seattle Aquarium, SYCAN has generated interest and involvement from a diverse set of stakeholders that extend beyond the museum sphere—including community-based organizations, educational institutions, and city and county government. Program staff, the zoo, and their partners have also learned valuable lessons in the art of catalyzing community. In particular, staff and partners have learned to "lead by stepping back" and allowing community—especially youth—to take control.

### ADJUSTMENTS, ADAPTATIONS & CHALLENGES

In 2014, Woodland Park Zoo, Pacific Science Center, and the Seattle Aquarium began exploring ways to join forces to provide ongoing opportunities for teens to deepen their understanding of climate change and take collective action. Their idea: to build a network connecting youth with local community partners to develop and launch teen-led climate action. It would start with three youth programs: Woodland Park Zoo's ZooCorps, Pacific Science Center's Discovery Corps, and Seattle Aquarium's Youth Ocean Advocates. In 2015, they officially launched the Seattle Youth Climate Action Network (SYCAN) with funding from The Ocean Project.

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Toward the end of 2016, the team recognized the need for broader and more diverse community input in the program beyond the main three organizational partners. To accomplish this, they formed a Steering Committee composed of representatives from organizational collaborators with whom SYCAN had connected over its first two years.

Involving more voices and perspectives from across the region led to a key shift in the project scope. The team acknowledged that relying on the original three institutions, which are located in either North Seattle or downtown, did not allow them to engage teens in South Seattle, South King County or the Eastside. Staff jettisoned the idea that SYCAN youth would mostly come from three original youth programs and expanded the program reach to draw youth from around the greater Seattle region. This also enabled the project to focus on communities most impacted by climate change.

In 2017, Woodland Park Zoo (WPZ) sought funding from IMLS for the Youth Climate Action Network-Catalyzing a Community project with a new goal: **“to rethink the role of the zoo and role we play as lead organization in this network,”** utilizing a Collective Impact model. The plan included further broadening of the Steering Committee to bring new partners into decision-making, including the University of Washington, individuals working on climate issues on county level, and smaller nonprofits.

## PROJECT ACTIVITIES & IMPACT

When the IMLS-funded phase of SYCAN launched in October of 2017, Woodland Park Zoo staff leading the project were focused primarily on creating more ownership and participation among the Steering Committee. Having realized that **“this isn’t a community driven model in the way we wanted it to be,”** they began asking **“how to transition in a way to be more inclusive and participatory?”** They recognized that, despite their goals to catalyze a community and youth leadership, the zoo was still **“at the center and the top”** of activities, and youth were involved as recipients and participants rather than leaders or decision-makers.

A few months later, project staff attended an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) workshop in Chicago with other members of the IMLS Community Catalyst cohort. The workshop affirmed their recent

realization of the need to become more community- and youth-driven while also providing tangible tools for engaging the Steering Committee and youth.

**Upon their return, staff began holding one-on-one Learning Conversations (an ABCD tool) with teens who had been engaged in previous activities and with Steering Committee members.** The conversations were structured as an informal exchange with the goal to build relationships and to discover the conversation partner’s perspectives on the issue and project as well as what strengths, capacities, connections, and insights they would be willing to contribute.

This wave of Learning Conversations yielded exciting results across the project. Learning Conversations with Steering Committee members led to a number of cognitions. They revealed ways in which zoo staff could create greater opportunities for members to play a more directive, contributive role than their current function as an advisory board. The conversations yielded a more nuanced understanding of the unique strengths of partners, their organizations; of individuals’ roles within their organizations; and of what each wished to gain from their involvement in the network. Finally, the one-on-one conversations led staff to realize the need to **“meet members where they are.”** **“We have everything from large institutions like the Seattle Aquarium to small community organizations like the Duwamish Cleanup Coalition and it makes sense for people to be involved in different ways. It doesn’t make sense for people to come to an in-person meeting for two and a half days every two months. People want to contribute in ways that make sense to them.”** (Eli Weiss, former SYCAN staff for Woodland Zoo.) Staff was then able to work with partners to adapt new avenues for participation and contribution.

Additionally, **Learning Conversations between staff and youth led to the emergence of youth leaders who had the energy, capacity, and desire to take on greater responsibility within the project.**

Finally, the conversations led the team to realize the importance of building relationships and of **“how we meet”** in community. Staff noted, **“We find that places where we have the opportunity to talk 10 minutes in front of a classroom are much less effective than where we can sit down for an hour and just have an informal conversation and chat and learn more about each other.”** This has shifted how staff now conducts outreach.



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# "Seattle Youth Climate Action Network"

## JOURNEY MAP



Where in the journey has the team engaged with the community and/or taken action with/alongside the community?

How did their work, approaches, and relationships change?



How did their assumptions or perspectives of their communities shift based on what they learned from ABCD and through working on their projects?



The founding partners realized that the team and project had to become more responsive to the community to have broad support and diverse input.



Team realizes this still isn't community driven in the way they wanted it to be; the most impacted communities aren't at the table, youth aren't in the lead, and partners are just advisors.



Holding Learning Conversations reaffirms "how important it is to build relationships with people. We find that places where have opportunity to talk for 10 minutes in front of a classroom are much less effective than where we can sit down for an hour and just have an informal conversation and chat and learn more about each other."



Through their experience with intentionally engaging different kinds and sizes of groups and organizations on their Steering Committee, staff realize: "It makes sense for people to be involved in different ways. We're not meeting community partners where they're at. People want to contribute in ways that make sense for them."



After youth begin to step into leadership, staff and adult steering committee members realize: "We've never asked the youth to tell us what they want us to be. Now, we see what we mean by youth-driven."

**“We’ve never asked the youth to tell us what they want us to be. Now we see what we mean by ‘youth-driven.’”**

Following this intensive engagement with youth and partners, SYCAN made a bold step toward their goal of becoming youth-driven by forming the Youth Leadership Team composed of the youth who had been most actively engaged in the program thus far, and who expressed a desire to lead during Learning Conversations.

Directly following this, the burgeoning network faced a major challenge when all project staff announced plans to leave the zoo within a short period of time, including the Community Engagement Supervisor that helped write the grant, the Audience Research Specialist in charge of evaluation, and the Community Engagement Coordinator overseeing the project.

Fortunately, the fresh energy and perspective brought by the new staff served to reinvigorate the project, and the new team initiated a shift to train the entire focus of the project on one key dimension: youth leadership. This resulted in a meeting in which the Youth Leadership Team proposed their project ideas and asked the (adult) Steering Committee members for advice.

This sparked a realization among staff and the Steering Committee that, until this point, **“We’ve never asked the youth to tell us what they want us to be. Now we see what we mean by youth-driven.”** The Steering Committee then agreed to fundamentally shift their function going forward from driving the project direction to supporting the direction provided by the Youth Leadership Team.

This shift in leadership dynamics informed and impacted the next wave of activities. The teams organized a highly successful fourth annual Youth Climate Action Summit. **While the previous three SYCAN youth summits had been highly successful in terms of youth turnout and community-wide recognition, this summit was significantly more youth-designed and driven. In fact, the youth planned the event themselves and then invited Zoo Staff, rather than the opposite dynamic of past summits!**

It had also become clear that the project’s foundational document, the Logic Model, was in need of significant revision. Staff spearheaded a process of drafting a new logic model which better reflected the new priority of fostering youth leadership in climate change. Staff then passed it to the Youth Leadership Team and Steering Committee for input and revisions. The process and resulting logic model served to create a clear, collectively defined focus and to reaffirm the project’s commitment to involving youth as the drivers of the project, rather than as recipients or participants in a program designed by adults.

Specific short-term outcomes from the recently developed theory of change and logic models that encapsulate these changes are as follows:

- SYCAN Youth Leadership Team (YLT) have ownership of decision-making power and are empowered to shape the future direction of SYCAN, based on priorities and needs identified by peers and community.

- SYCAN YLT increase opportunities and experiences to drive climate action through working with community partners.
- SYCAN youth increase ability and confidence to communicate with diverse groups about climate change.
- SYCAN youth feel that their personal actions can make a positive impact on local climate related issues.
- Network of community organizations have increased collaboration in support of youth climate action.

As a whole, the program has become more youth-driven and youth-led than it initially was envisioned. Youth involved on the leadership team are able to drive meetings, create agendas, and schedule events using the zoo and community partners as support rather than a driving force. SYCAN is in the process of metamorphosis and recreating the program to advocate for the changes that the youth want to see with the appropriate project and financial stakeholders. **For the first time, students are returning to the Youth Leadership Team for the second year and are excited to build upon the lessons they learned in being part of the Seattle Youth Climate Action Network.** They are motivated to take more deliberate climate action and write their narrative on how they would like to do it versus the narrative that was previously provided for them.

The team is committed to sustaining what works--especially the interest of the youth in returning to the program and driving meetings, logistics, and actions they want to accomplish. In those actions, program staff hope that the youth continue to push the envelope and for the Steering Committee to continue plugging into the network when asked to by the youth. The Steering Committee is committed to





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Jenny Mears  
Supervisor, Community Initiatives  
Woodland Park Zoo

providing resources, and organizations are determined to provide cost-share so they can allocate their time to the program. Woodland Park Zoo would like to see these practices sustained moving forward.

## LEARNINGS & IMPACT ON PROJECT ORGANIZATIONS & INDIVIDUALS

The process of expanding their community catalyst work this past year has yielded rich learnings and impacts for staff and leadership beyond the project itself.

Woodland Zoo staff have learned the power of stepping back and letting others, in this case, the Youth Leadership Team and community partners in the Steering Committee, drive what climate action will look like. Staff learned when to step in and offer parameters or resources, as well as when to stay silent to ensure that other voices, especially voices that are often marginalized or ignored, are heard. This is in strong alignment with a new overall approach which zoo leadership is interested in incorporating into other areas of its work.

SYCAN participants have learned to find new assets, resources, and capacities on their own. Initially, the assets that were mapped represented personnel, space and facilities, materials and equipment, expertise, networks, and economic power. Specifically, some of the more unique assets to SYCAN lie in the knowledge of climate science, justice, and policy. Staff has identified that in the future, SYCAN should revisit the asset map with the Steering Committee members and the Youth Leadership Team to highlight assets that can propel the program forward.

Steering Committee members have seen significant shifts. Staff reports that one of the Steering Committee members shared the following about the impact of being connected to this group of people: "Being part of the SYCAN Steering Committee has

provided benefits that extend well-beyond the immediate value and benefits of be part of the SYCAN program. The Steering Committee provides a unique opportunity to engage with, and learn from, a range of community partners and organizations that our group doesn't usually intersect with. One of these community groups has now become a formal organizational partner and, together, we have successfully secured funding from the state of Washington to develop a range of teacher trainings that aim to bring climate science and relevant climate impacts science into classrooms across the state. This partnership, and the subsequent funding and project, would not have happened without the opportunity to build these connections built through mutual participation in the SYCAN program."

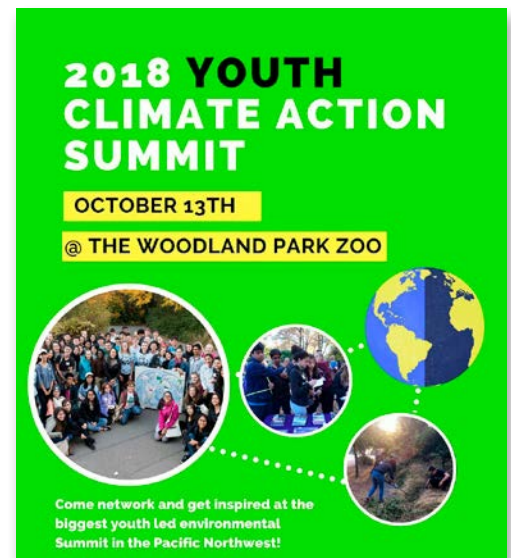
On an individual level, zoo project staff have experienced significant transformations in how they do and perceive the work of catalyzing community. Jenny and Danté, the two current program staff, report that **"we can better articulate the value and necessity of community driven action rather than action determined by organizations. While organizations can provide power in their assets, organizations should not be the ones that dominate the community space they are developing. Rather, they can serve as spots for community facilitation and spaces for creative sharing."**

Danté notes "an increased ability to hold back his biases in driving actions he, as an adult, thinks the community should take on. In place of that bias, he has learned how to be a better facilitator and liaison to create space for the communities, ideas, especially the youth's ideas."

Jenny also struggled with letting go of driving what the events and activities will look like after years of planning and facilitating various programs and events for the zoo. She reflects that, "while it's definitely been a challenge to step back, it's been incredibly gratifying to

see the different direction that the youth have taken our program's activities and to realize that **when their voices are engaged and the power is shifted to their hands, the action, events, and activities are going to be much more relevant and inclusive than I could ever plan on my own or when working with other adults!"**

The work has transformed how they view what it means to engage community. Danté reflects: **"Engaging community comes with breaking down the meaning of 'engage' in the form of activation of potential. The potential and drive comes from the community and sourcing its own resources, while leveraging existing resources of community institutions (like libraries and museums). Engaging community is not a means to control the direction of that community."**



## LEARNINGS FOR THE FIELD

In its first year of experimentation and innovation the SYCAN project has contributed important lessons to the greater field of libraries and museums. In particular, Woodland Park Zoo believes that collaboration between the community partners and youth climate leaders will result in a stronger, more representative network that can be emulated across the country. The SYCAN team also hopes to demonstrate that youth not only know about climate change and climate justice, but they also want to take action and are leaders, not of the future, but of today.



**Staff reflects that this work has reshaped their perspective on what it means to be a museum:**

**“As a zoo, it has been interesting to play this role in catalyzing community. As an institution that hosts the community for a variety of events, we try to link our efforts to community work that is involved around conservation of wildlife and their habitats. Through this grant, we have been able to see how we can leverage our communal space and mission to drive action in our communities.”**



Prepared for the Institute of Museum and Library Services by the DePaul University and ABCD Evaluation Team in collaboration with Woodland Park Zoo Staff. Photos courtesy of Woodland Park Zoo.



TO LEARN MORE:

**Seattle Youth Climate Action Network**  
[www.seattleyouthcan.org/blog](http://www.seattleyouthcan.org/blog)

**IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative**  
[www.imls.gov/ci](http://www.imls.gov/ci)

