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FOCUS ON DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION:

BUILDING SKILLS FOR INCLUSIVE & EQUITABLE RELATIONSHIPS

Fire is changing and we need to change, too. Yesterday's fire management approaches—exclusive governmental control of fire and extinguishing virtually every wildfire as quickly as possible—no longer work. In fact, they have made our fire problems worse. Tomorrow's solutions—sharing risk and responsibility for wildfires and prescribed fires, including managing more fires to provide long-term benefits to nature and people—require different skillsets and mindsets.

Successfully living with fire requires the engagement and commitment of everyone in the affected area. For those working to improve landscape and community resilience to wildfire, this can only be achieved through equitable partnerships that represent the full diversity of the area's residents. Similarly, more diverse perspectives are needed—at all levels—if we are to improve our fire management system. To acquire these perspectives, fire management practitioners in leadership positions must both recruit diverse staff and create a welcoming environment where everyone feels safe speaking up, being who they are, and bringing their full selves to the table. PERFACT's diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work equips practitioners with some of the skills needed to act more inclusively and nurture equitable relationships.

We have steadily increased our investments in DEI learning over the past two or three years, and look forward to further growth. In the past year, PERFACT has hosted about a dozen in-person and online trainings and workshops, supported a pilot Latinx engagement project in Washington, and organized a two-week learning exchange centered on women in fire.

Virtual Workshops Expand DEI Reach

In previous years, most of our DEI offerings were in-person workshops or sessions designed for members of a single Fire Network, such as Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (FAC Net), or for a Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREN). This year signaled two departures from this, as we

“Several years ago, FAC Net made it clear to me that our industry has a significant problem with diversity, equity, and inclusion. FAC Net has also provided numerous tools and resources to help our organizations address the problem. I appreciate that this has become a focus over the past couple of years, and would like to continue to follow the approach that FAC Net and its members are taking to push for progress.

“I really appreciate getting to have these conversations with other fire staff who share values around DEI. Thank you for organizing and facilitating.

What is PERFACT?

Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together is a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. The agreement supports the Fire Learning Network (since 2002), Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (2008), Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (2013), Indigenous Peoples Burning Network (2016) and other efforts that bring people together to collectively identify and meet our wildfire challenges.

WORKSHOP 1

Psychological Safety, and Introduction to the Concepts of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion



EQUALITY



EQUITY

WORKSHOP 2

Active Bystander, Active Self

NAME IT

“That wasn’t funny.”

“It was offensive.”

“That was demeaning.”

CLAIM IT

“In this organization we don’t ...”

“In this home we don’t treat each other like that.”

“I’m not okay with that behavior.”

CHANGE IT

“Please apologize to X”

“Please don’t do that again.”

designed a four-part workshop series that moved online, and was aimed at developing a new cohort of DEI learners from all the fire networks. There was considerable interest and we engaged 65 members and leaders, representing more than 25 organizations, in these highly interactive online sessions.

Maria Estrada, The Nature Conservancy’s Deputy Director of Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, developed and led the sessions. These were designed to develop skills as well as model best practices to help participants champion DEI work in their organizations. The content was tailored for members of the fire management and fire adaptation community, drawing on numerous case studies from Maria’s work with members of the fire networks over the years.

Current events rendered this work timelier and more relevant than we could have imagined. The sessions had been designed from the start to be delivered online, to allow broad access, and so they were not derailed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. More starkly, George Floyd was murdered just before the fourth workshop in the series. Like many others across the country and the world, cohort members’ eyes were opened. The work took on new meaning and immediacy. Maria re-designed workshop 4 to make space for participants to talk about what they were doing to learn about and practice anti-racism.

Media coverage of COVID-19’s tragic and disproportionate effects on Black, Indigenous and people of color, and those living in poverty, has also shown starkly how inequities manifest in life-threatening ways. Having already built a foundation for addressing DEI issues, the fire networks are in a position to help channel the current societal attention to these inequities into positive change for the fire management, community wildfire adaptation, and conservation communities.

Groundbreaking Pilot Explores Latinx Community Engagement

In 2019 PERFAC staff made introductions that connected people from The Nature Conservancy, Washington Resource Conservation and Development Council, Washington State Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (WAFAC) and the international Latinx sustainability and capacity-building non-profit Sachamama. Together, they developed a pilot Latinx community-engagement project in Wenatchee and the Yakima Valley in Washington. These areas were severely impacted by wildfires in 2014 and 2015, and it became apparent that the Latinx residents did not have access to resources necessary to prepare for, respond to, or recover from wildfire.

The goal of this pilot project was to develop a framework to engage the Latinx community in wildfire adaptation. More than 1,000 individuals and organizations—businesses, local school districts, Wenatchee Chamber of Commerce, Univision and local radio stations—have taken part in this

work thus far. Through a series of listening sessions, strategic partnerships were developed with four organizations: the Latino Community Fund, Community for the Advancement of Family Education (CAFÉ), Parque Padrinos and Nuestra Casa. Sachamama partnered with these organizations to host a series of workshops through a collaborative process that empowers the Latinx community to act on adaptation and resilience efforts through the lens of local climate concerns—in this case, wildfire. The Climate Innovation Lab nurtured connections with local fire adaptation practitioners, equipped community leaders with knowledge about wildfire adaptation, and provided them with leadership tools to plan and implement solutions based on community needs. The first phase workshops were conducted in person; as COVID-19 spread, the team pivoted and transitioned the remainder of the pilot to virtual workshops.

More than 80 community members took part in the Climate Innovation Lab. Participants are now advocating for Wenatchee and Sunnyside to adopt city-wide wildfire preparedness day or month proclamations to increase outreach to and engagement with Latinx residents. At the state level, the Latino Community Fund and Front and Centered—organizations on the frontlines of economic and environmental change for climate justice—have begun to lead a wildfire legislative agenda.

CAFÉ, Nuestra Casa and the Latino Community Fund have integrated fire adapted communities work into their programs of work, and are engaging residents and stakeholders in their communities to promote and coordinate wildfire preparedness efforts. They have also joined WAFAC and are collaborating with other organizations on wildfire adaptation efforts.

Women-in-Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchange

Women-in-Fire Training Exchanges (WTREX) are modeled after other Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREX), but specifically focus on cultivating a more diverse, equitable, innovative and ecologically sound fire management system. In addition to operational fire training, WTREX events provide unique networking opportunities, mentorship, awareness and social connections. As a grassroots network that engages fire practitioners of all genders and backgrounds, WTREX is dedicated to evolving the fire culture through the empowerment and advancement of women, and to bringing awareness of the value of diversity in the fire workforce.

The fourth WTREX was planned for March 2020 in Virginia, after previous WTREX in northwestern California (2016), Yosemite (2017) and northern Florida (2019). WTREX 2020 was set to bring 45 people from 8 countries and 20 states to southwestern Virginia, where they would burn and train together, participate in workshops and discussions, and build peer and mentor relationships with one another. However, as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded in the weeks leading up to the

WORKSHOP 3

Putting Our Learning Into Practice

“The topic is highly relevant and personally interesting as a white male. This is a skill I really want to hone in my effort to be a better ally.

“The real-life scenarios are powerful and effective.

“I always find it reinforcing to hear the words and phrases that Maria uses in this sensitive work. Receiving examples of good language to adopt is a wonderful and useful gift!

WORKSHOP 4

Power Signatures and Grounded Journeys of Identity

POWER UP

Defines reality, “truth”

Sets rules, standards

Seen as normal

Expected

to follow rules

Expected to fit in

Seen as less than

POWER DOWN

KEY TAKEAWAYS

From the Washington Latinx Engagement Pilot

Inclusion is about encouraging people with diverse perspectives to make explicit use of cultural experience and knowledge to inform and enhance the work.

Relationships and trust are critical in making the connections between differences and the living-with-fire work. Relationships come before tasks.

Leaders in the fire world who understand the importance of diverse perspectives need to fight all forms of dominance, including any one functional area's presumption of superiority over another.

Including Latinx communities and leaders in fire work presents an opportunity to gain new insights and develop new approaches to fire adaptation and community resilience.

To be successful, leaders must promote honest discourse. This entails encouraging dissent and acknowledging tensions, as well as resolving tensions skillfully and in inclusive and equitable ways.

event, it became clear that gathering a group like this would be unwise. Undeterred, the organizers quickly pivoted to a virtual format, and ended up hosting 21 online sessions (30 hours of content and connecting) over the course of the two weeks.

The virtual WTREX sessions covered a wide range of topics, from prescribed fire tactics to emotional intelligence to the fire ecology of Virginia. Diversity, equity and inclusion were core themes of the special sessions and were incorporated explicitly—with targeted trainings on unconscious bias and active bystander skills—and implicitly, with sessions on the power of language, gender dynamics and firefighter mental health. Sessions were designed to maximize sharing and discussion, and by the end of the two weeks, an impressive level of camaraderie had developed within the group. As one participant wrote in their evaluation, “WTREX had an extremely refreshing atmosphere. The small groups and exercises via Zoom enabled me to have the confidence to share and open up to a new group of colleagues and friends in the fire world. I honestly feel even after just a few weeks of interaction, if I had a question or needed a little direction, I feel like I could reach out to anyone on our WTREX team.”

Looking Forward

Participants in the virtual workshop series surveyed afterwards indicated a strong desire to diversify workforces, including within their organizations, and to better engage Indigenous peoples and Latinx communities. We are looking into a range of options to continue to engage this cohort of learners, including hosting monthly virtual workshops, expanding FAC Net's existing DEI community of practice to include this new cohort, and developing a DEI-focused online workspace where people can connect.

In Washington, project leads are synthesizing what they heard, and putting together products to share what they've learned so far. Culturally appropriate wildland fire videos, with a written curriculum, workshop facilitation guides and sample agendas—in English and Spanish—will be produced to help others kick-start similar efforts in their communities.

And the virtual crew of participants in this year's WTREX has been invited to the next in-person WTREX, planned for Virginia in March 2021, to continue and build on what they started together in this unusual year.

All of this DEI work is but an early step in a long-term journey for participants, and for PERFACT as a whole. We look forward to helping build a society whose response to fire is as rich and varied as fire itself.

For more about the Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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