



Pennsylvania Outdoor Corps

A partnership of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, Student Conservation Association, and Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation.

2020 Annual Report

About the Pennsylvania Outdoor Corps

The Pennsylvania Outdoor Corps leads to career pathways and family sustaining wages by providing hands-on professional development opportunities for youth and young adults as they complete resource management projects in parks, forests, and public lands. Since its inception in 2016, the Corps has provided social and emotional development opportunities, environmental education, and work skills training to over 750 members. For some members, the Corps is their introduction to outdoor recreation and environmental pursuits. Other members use the program to further conservation career aspirations. More and more members each year capitalize on their training to propel them into professional employment with DCNR and its conservation allies. Each member, no matter their background, leaves the program with enhanced professional skillsets, strengthened conservation ethic, and a network of support to aid them on their professional path forward.

The program is delivered by four primary partners:

- The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) — a state agency responsible for the management of the state park and forest system, ecological and geological resources, and conservation and recreation projects.
- The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry (L&I) — a state agency that provides employment, job training, and job assistance services, along with administering employment benefits and workplace standards.
- The Student Conservation Association (SCA) — a national organization that develops and manages conservation service programming for youth and young adults.
- The Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation — a statewide, non-profit organization that supports the missions of Pennsylvania's parks and forests.

2020 Program

In its fifth year, the Pa. Outdoor Corps has had 61 individual participants come through its programming in 2020.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision was made to cancel the six-week summer Youth Corps program and only field the Adult Corps program.

Of the 61 adult members that were hired into the program, 57 finished giving the program a 95 percent retention rate.

Adult Corps

There was a total of 61 individual participants in nine program locations for the Adult Corps in 2020:

- Philadelphia
- Wilkes-Barre
- Williamsport
- Harrisburg
- Roving resource crew based in Harrisburg
- Altoona
- St. Marys
- Meadville
- Pittsburgh

The season ran from February 10 to December 7, 2020. Members worked four days per week, for a total of 37.5 hours per week.

Members earned \$12.70 per hour; were given a \$.50 raise after July 1; and had access to employer-sponsored healthcare and other benefits.

The duration of the Adult Corps allowed members to receive transferable certifications and trainings. Members could elect to receive certifications in pesticide application, chainsaw safety, Wilderness First Aid, Red Card Fire Certification, and forestry rigging.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first nine weeks of the program were spent teleworking.

Over the course of nine weeks, members participated in a varied curriculum of online certifications and coursework, environmental education webinars, outdoor enrichment activities, and participation in professional development discussions.

Members participated in 252 hours dedicated to a structured corps-wide curriculum and the remaining 85.5 hours were individualized by the crew and focused on members' unique interests and personal goals.

Over nine weeks of teleservice, corps members spent more than 94 hours completing 194 certifications that included online Red Card Wildland Firefighter training, Hunter Safety, and three primary online courses on topics in environmental education and social innovation.

Additionally, 12 independently selected environmental online courses varying in length were also pursued by members and directly contributed to individuals' goals set for the season.

During the nine weeks of teleservice, staff from DCNR, the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation, and the Pittsburgh chapter of In Your Own Backyard provided corps-wide webinars.

Professionals gave their time, insight, and advice on personal and professional experiences, environmental subjects, and professional development.

Specific topics included climate change, career pathways, public policy, communication, conservation, social innovation, crowdsourcing, grassroots community projects, and environmental education.

Four career exploration webinars were provided by DCNR staff representatives from all levels of the agency, including DCNR's Policy Office, Communications Office, Office of Applied Science, and the Assistant Director of State Parks.

This "Corps Conversations" guest speaker series was highly influential for corps participants and is something that will continue and be expanded in the future.

New to this year's program was the implementation of the Corps Academy, which ran from September 14-16.

The purpose of the Corps Academy was for corps members to learn more about professional careers within DCNR and partner organizations, spend time with other corps members, and complete service projects in local communities.

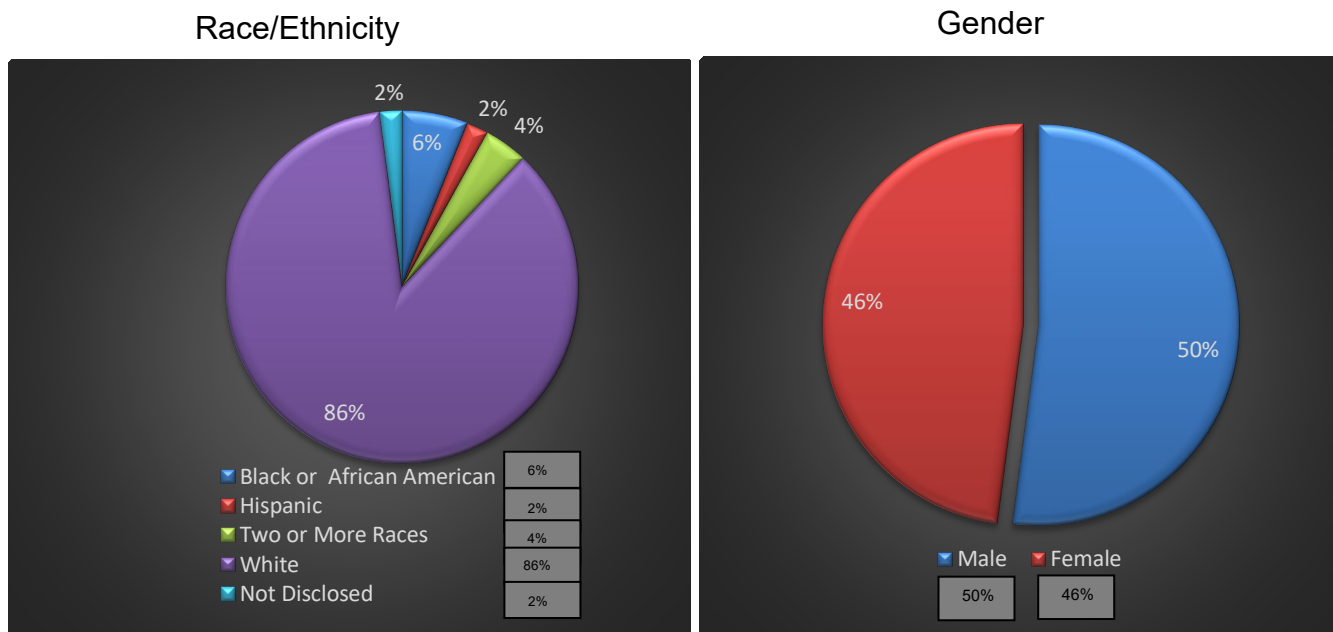
Members participated in various presentations that were facilitated by the following:

- DCNR Bureau of Forestry
 - Ecological Services Section
 - Division of Forest Fire Protection
- DCNR Bureau of Topographic and Geologic Survey
 - Groundwater & Environmental Geology Section
- PA Office of Administration
 - Conservation and Environment Human Resources Delivery Center - Staffing and Classifications
 - Resume writing
 - Interview skills
 - Introduction to employment.pa.gov
 - DCNR Ranger and Ranger 1 Classifications

During the Corps Academy, each corps team participated in a service project. These included, but were not limited to, dumpsite clean ups, community gardening, and mask making.

Program Statistics

2020 Outdoor Corps Program Demographics



The program's member demographics continue to mirror Pennsylvania race and ethnicity data.

The SCA and DCNR staff invested much time in 2019 and 2020 establishing partnerships with grassroots organizations that serve diverse constituents.

As a result, at the time of cancellation of the youth corps program due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 21 percent of the members slated to be selected for youth crews identified as racially/ethnically diverse. The corps will continue to build on this work.

2020 saw an increase in female participation in the young adult corps program.

Conservation

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Adult Corps did not start actual field work until early June (sans a few short days in the field for several crews at the beginning of the season).

Although the corps missed nine weeks of fieldwork, they were still able to accomplish a remarkable amount of conservation projects across the state.

DCNR staff identified meaningful conservation work and provided the support to complete those projects.

When asked on their Post Program Member Survey, 80 percent of members stated that they felt like they were making a difference 80-100 percent of the time while in the field.

Below are direct quotes from members that provide examples of how they viewed their positive impact:



“While planting a buffer between the road and a wildlife habitat frequented by elk, so many people would stop and ask what we were doing and why we were planting trees.

Often, they’d express frustration at first that they then wouldn’t be able to see the elk anymore.

I’d gladly stop what I was doing to explain why we were planting the buffer, talk about sustainability and habitat conservation, and how our habits affect their habits -- getting them to agree that it’s better for them and the elk they dearly love if everyone parked their cars in the parking lot and walked to the deer blind so as not to disturb any elk while getting a much better view.”



“I was helping build a riparian buffer on the shore of Beltzville State Park, Pennsylvania, when a woman approached me.

I could tell right away she wasn’t happy that a Bobcat was auguring noisily during her noontime walk with her dog, as we had been getting grumpy glares from some of the locals all day.

She asked, ‘What are you doing?’ and I politely and patiently told her how the riparian buffer would help keep the geese from coming onto the shore and making a mess, as well as help preserve the shoreline from erosion.

She seemed really grateful after that, thanking us for our hard work because she hated when her dog stepped in goose scat.”

Summary of Conservation Work Completed in 2020

Category of Work	Quantity
Building and maintaining structures (Unit: # structures)	167
Certifications (Unit: # certifications)	194
Improving land (Unit: # acres)	332
Improving shore/waterway (Unit: # feet)	9,602
Improving trail (Unit: # miles)	88
Trees and native shrubs planted (Unit: # plants)	2,472
COVID-19 masks made (Unit: # masks)	414

Project Highlights

The 2020 Adult Corps crews completed a variety of sustainable conservation projects.

Listed below are just a few examples that illustrate the technical work that crews accomplished.

Leonard Harrison State Park Turkey Path Repairs — Williamsport Young Adult Crew

Removed the damaged structure and built 3 platforms, 3 sections of stairs, and built a retaining wall for viewing platform.



Elk State Forest — St. Marys Young Adult Crew

Built new Whitehead Pavilion



Beltzville State Park- Wilkes-Barre Adult Crew Riparian buffer zone



Conservation Careers

One of the goals of the program is to provide opportunities for members and leaders to further their experience in the field and, ultimately, move into conservation careers.

During their service, members engaged with various park staff, learned about what conservation jobs are, and had opportunities to job shadow.

The following quotes were taken directly from post program member survey questions asking about job readiness:



“The more I work with the SCA and in a conservation setting, I find myself wanting to continue doing that. From last year to this year, I’ve found that I really do enjoy this work and want to find something that I can make a career of out of it.”



“Resume training and workshops, and numerous sessions with the Pa. Department of Conservation and Natural Resources’ HR team were helpful. Several tree remediation projects also improved my interests in park management and ecological improvement in an urban setting.”

Secretary Dunn and Deputy Secretary Norbeck visit with the Meadville Adult Crew in Oil Creek State Park.



Active and alumni Outdoor Corps members obtained professional employment with DCNR, the SCA, or other conservation organizations in 2020.

While this list is not comprehensive of all members that secured employment, it offers a snapshot into the program's effectiveness transitioning young people into conservation careers. Each position listed was captured by a program member in 2020.

Workplace	Position
PA DCNR - Park Region 1	Park Manager Trainee
PA DCNR - Park Region 2	Assistant Park Manager, Racoon Creek
PA DCNR - Park Region 2	Semi-Skilled Laborer, Pymatuning
PA DCNR - Park Region 2	Environmental Interpretive Technician
PA DCNR - Park Region 3	Laborer, Kings Gap
PA DCNR - Park Region 3	Park Manager Trainee
PA DCNR - Park Region 4	Park Manager Trainee
PA DCNR - Park Region 4	Park Manager Trainee
ECI	Utility Forest Technician
Glacier National Park	Forest Technician
PA Horticultural Society	Field Coordinator, Philadelphia Land Care
Shoener Environmental	Ecologist 2
Student Conservation Association	California Leadership Corps
Student Conservation Association	California Leadership Corps
Western Pennsylvania Conservancy	Land Acquisition Specialist
Wyoming County Conservation District	Agricultural Conservation Programs Coordinator

Public Partnerships Program

The Public Partnerships Program offers municipal and non-profit organizations the chance to work with the Pa. Outdoor Corps on a cost-share basis.

Public partners contribute half of the crew's wages and overhead costs. Projects must have a conservation focus and must take place on land that is open to the public.

Twenty-one public partner projects were slated to take place in 2020. However, due to COVID-19 cancellations, only six of those were completed.

2020 Public Partnership Projects were:

Public Partner	Project Site	Scope of Work
Murrysville Borough	Duff Park invasive species removal	Assist volunteers in the removal of invasives throughout Duff Park. Duff Park is PA Wild Plant Sanctuary.
The Nature Conservancy	Cove Mountain Preserve	Chemical treatment of invasive Mile-a-Minute and Japanese Stilt Grass.
Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor	Weisport Trail Section Work	Rehab and reconstruct portions the Delaware and Lehigh Rail Trail near Weisport, PA.
Susquehanna National Heritage Area/Columbia Borough	River Trails Service Center Park Expansion	Level and clear trail pathway; remove invasive species from River Park Expansion area and historic bridge piers.
The Land Conservancy for Southern Chester County	Stateline Woods Preserve	Forest restoration native tree and shrub planting.
Western Pennsylvania Conservancy	Tom's Run Nature Reserve	Trail and habitat improvements throughout the Nature Reserve.

Conclusion

Although the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the program in many ways, the 2020 corps members, leaders, and staff met that challenge; and turned it into an opportunity resulting in a very successful season in which members expanded their knowledge of conservation careers, learned valuable field skills, and completed many needed projects throughout the commonwealth.

It is often best to let the success of the program be shown through the direct impact on the members serving in the field.

Here are just a few examples of what Pennsylvania Outdoor Corps members shared about their experience:

"It's hard to choose just one story but something that really stands out for me was working at Penn Roosevelt State Park.



The 2019 Altoona crew had started a CCC-style pavilion and it was only about half finished by the end of our project time due to the scale of the project and the weather preventing us from moving forward.

The 2020 Altoona crew had the opportunity to finish it and we did, working on it from start to finish was a great experience -- seeing it come up from a brushed-in area with remnants of the CCC structure originally there to a standing achievement for myself and the people who worked on it with me for future generations to see a sort of legacy project and even camp near it in the group camping sites we had built."



"When we worked at Promised Land State Park, we were given the opportunity to take an environmental education day at their museum.

We were able to see pictures of the Civilian Conservation Corps when they were in the process of helping build Promised Land State Park.

The black-and-white photos were brought to life for me because it was full of crew members smiling and joking around, just like we were a few decades later.

They worked very hard to make the park into what it was, and we were working very hard to keep it that way and better it."

The Pennsylvania Outdoor Corps overcame many challenges in 2020. The pandemic caused a 26 percent increase in visitor use to parks. The corps was able to assist at a critical time when parks' natural and physical resources were being stressed.

Not only was the corps able to help mitigate some of the degradation brought by an overwhelming number of visitors; but was also able to complete many projects that will help to protect Pennsylvania's natural resources for many generations to come.

