A Community-Led First Foods Forest
United States
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Section I: Narrative

My project was to help grow a First Foods Forest of native and other edible plants that serves as a BIPOC-centered space for education and community-building with the Sauvie Island Center (SIC). Thus, this summer I aimed to plant and maintain the forest, build connections with potential community partners through outreach and public events, design curriculum for lessons relating to the First Foods Forest, and pilot this curriculum with youth through SIC’s summer camp. No other fundraising efforts contributed to my project directly, although I relied on many of the resources of SIC, which is a nonprofit funded by various grants. For many years, I have been interested in gardening, community-based education, disparities in access to food and environmental education, and multicultural ecological knowledge. This project was born after I interned with the Sauvie Island Center in fall 2020 and learned about their need for support in order to create First Foods Forest.

My project responds to multiple issues: the degradation of native plant ecosystems, indigenous peoples’ lack of access to their traditional foods, and disparities in access to fresh produce, gardening space, and environmental education. These matters have long historical roots including displacement of indigenous peoples from their land by white settlers in the late 1800s, racist urban planning that segregated low-income Black families in neighborhoods with little green space, and disinvestment in public schools. I carefully chose to work at Sauvie Island, which is near low-income neighborhoods in North Portland, because of the relationship and trust I built with SIC, along with their existing connections to a multitude of community organizations and schools. Additionally, as an island entirely inhabited by wildlife areas and farms, the site offers a natural environment and space to grow food that students from Portland may not otherwise be able to experience.

Working at my host site was a rewarding and often difficult experience. I spent a lot of time working outside caring for the garden after a year of online school, and sharing that experience with colleagues, community members and youth was very healing for me. However, the two record-breaking heatwaves this summer in Portland were very difficult for me and my team physically and it stressed the plants and complicated our programming. Additionally, I learned that community-led projects are in fact very complicated. Navigating adjustments between diverse stakeholders took more time than expected and required some changes in project direction. Coupled with internal changes in my host organization, there was a point in which I was uncertain about what would happen to the First Foods Forest after I left. However, after hard work and many conversations, I am confident in its future.

To me, peace and justice are intimately connected. For people to live peaceful lives, historical injustices must be addressed, and present material conditions must be made equitable. My project aimed to address both of these facets, acknowledging the displacement of indigenous people from Sauvie Island and providing land and access to native plants to the community, and by providing food and farming education to the youth. Over the next several years, as the fruit-bearing trees and bushes we planted mature, the forest will serve as a gathering space for community groups, a source of traditional foods, and an educational resource for youth and others. At the end of the summer we hosted eight high school students with the Northeast STEAM Coalition which is an after-school science program for youth in its pilot stage. Due to the success of the pilot program, it is expected to become permanent in which
students will continue to come out to the First Food Forest to learn about native plant ecology and watch the shrubs they planted grow.

This project has changed me and how I think about the world in several ways. First, my confidence in plant knowledge and farming abilities has increased dramatically, which is a goal I have been personally working towards for many years. Additionally, I have developed my ability to connect with new people and organizations. These both relate to the most significant lesson I learned this summer: that getting to know and building relationships with a place and the people in it takes a lot of time. As someone who moved around a lot growing up, I previously put less value on place-based knowledge, thinking that I could participate in community initiatives in any location. Now, after spending 12 weeks getting to deeply know just one acre of land and building relationships with a small number of community members, I understand that creating meaningful connections takes much longer than one summer. Therefore, I am approaching the future with more intentionality about not just what I want to do, but where I want to do it. Also, creating curriculum and teaching the youth was incredibly rewarding, affirming my interest in education and developing my ability as an educator.

The COVID-19 pandemic restricted the capacity of the summer camp that we held, preventing us from doing activities such as cooking events, and occasionally limiting staff when they had to quarantine due to positive covid exposure. We adapted by switching to distributing food gift cards instead of direct produce, and covering our work when needed. Additionally, many staff and committee meetings were held over Zoom. Overall, since First Foods Forest, summer camp and most events were all outdoors. We were able to safely carry out most of the project by just wearing masks and distancing from each other. To future PfP grantees, whether you are conducting a project during a pandemic or not, I believe that flexibility and preparing back-up plans are crucial. I went into this project with specific plans, but also general overarching goals. My explicit plans had to change many times as we adapted to the pandemic as well as other challenges, but I was able to stick to the values grounding my project proposal and continue working towards my primary goals. Overall, I definitely believe my project was a success.

“I am proud of my project for connecting people from elementary to high school, and beyond the land on Sauvie Island. This project showed me both the challenges and rewards of diverse community-led work, affirming my desire to coordinate community-led environmental initiatives in the future, but also giving me the tools and experience to do so thoughtfully and successfully.”

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Section II: Photographs