



Youth Advocacy Stories from the Field

AZA | Learn

**ASSOCIATION
OF ZOOS &
AQUARIUMS**

Youth Advocacy

Moderator: *Ayana Melvan, Aquarium Conservation Partnership and Afterschool Alliance Ambassador Alum for Rhode Island*

Panelists:

- *Sean den Bok; Fresno Chaffee Zoo*
- *Elliot A. Rivera former Executive Director of Youth In Action, Inc. and Principal Consultant and Founder of Desahogo Leadership*
- *Miguela Marzolf, Seattle Aquarium*
- *Shervin Hess, Oregon Zoo*

Closing Remarks: *Stephanie Joseph, New York Aquarium, WCS*



Washington, DC June 2017 Youth Advocacy Day on the Hill



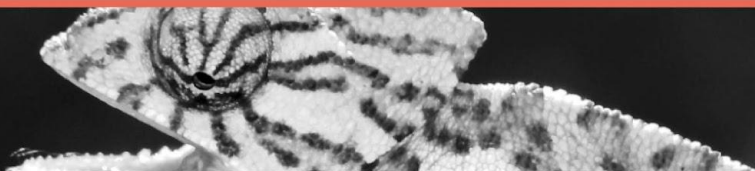


Moving youth from the field to leadership to advocacy.



Exploring Strategies for Co-Creating Advocacy Programs with Youth

From programs *for* youth → to movements *with* youth



Desahogo

- LEADERSHIP -

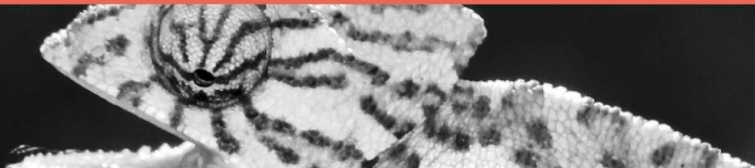
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OF ZOOS &
AQUARIUMS

Stories:

Youth In Action/ACP & Azul



Aquarium
Conservation
Partnership



Three Foundations to Co-Creating Authentically with Youth



Power Sharing

Creating genuine partnerships where youth have decision-making authority and their voices are central to program design and implementation.



Culture & Belonging

Fostering inclusive environments where every young person feels valued, respected, and included to contribute their unique perspectives.



Resourcing Youth Leadership

Providing the necessary financial, educational, and mentorship resources to equip youth with the tools and support they need to lead effectively.

Key Takeaways & Next Steps

Intergenerational Power Through Partnership

Youth are not just beneficiaries or leaders of tomorrow; they are powerful agents of change today. True co-creation unlocks their innovative potential which benefits everyone.

Investing in the Future

By allocating dedicated resources and fostering inclusive cultures, we build sustainable movements co-led by multi-generations of conservationists, sustaining and deepening impact.

Actionable Steps

- Review current youth engagement strategies.
- Identify opportunities for shared decision-making and partnering with organizations already doing youth leadership.
- Develop and resource mentorship and advocacy programs for youth leaders that sustain these efforts.



SEATTLE AQUARIUM

Engaging Youth in Policy Advocacy

August 21, 2025





**Mission: Inspiring conservation of our
marine environment.**

“Reef”-reshing ways to support corals

- Grade: K – 5th
- Activity: Coral Conservation Contest

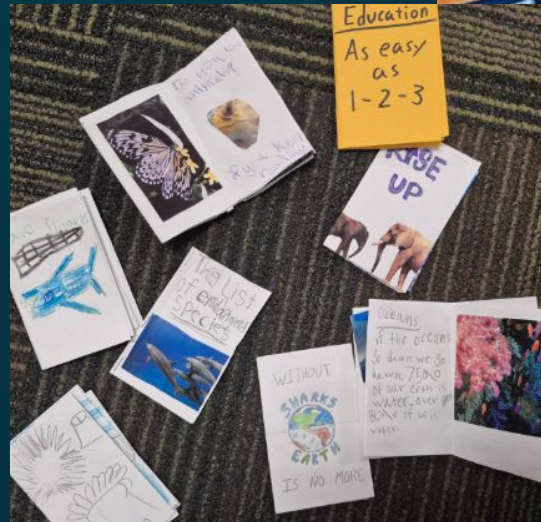


It's never too early to be an advocate

- Ages: 6 – 9
- Activity: Silent March


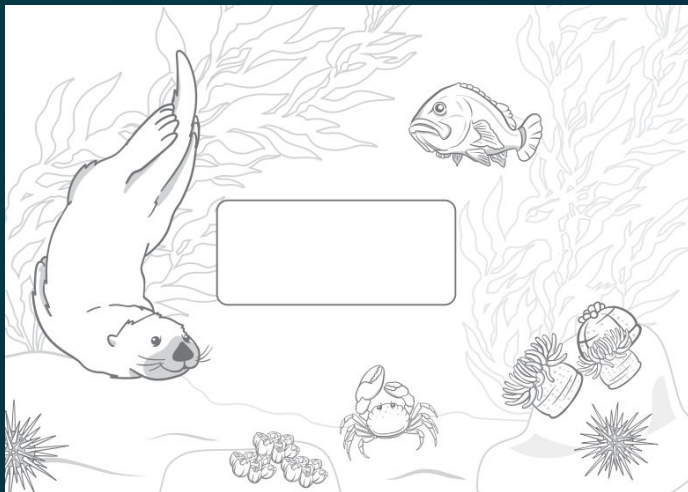


- Ages: 6 – 12
- Activity: Zines



You “otter” know you can always help the ocean.

- **Grades: 6th - 12th**
- **Activity: Postcards**




Dear _____

I am writing to ask for your support of the Help Our Kelp Act (H.R.5487). This bill is important to me because it funds the protection and recovery of local kelp forests and research to better understand their decline. Kelp forests are important to me because

Thank you for reading my letter. I hope to hear back about the actions you are willing to take to help kelp.

_____ (name) _____ (age)



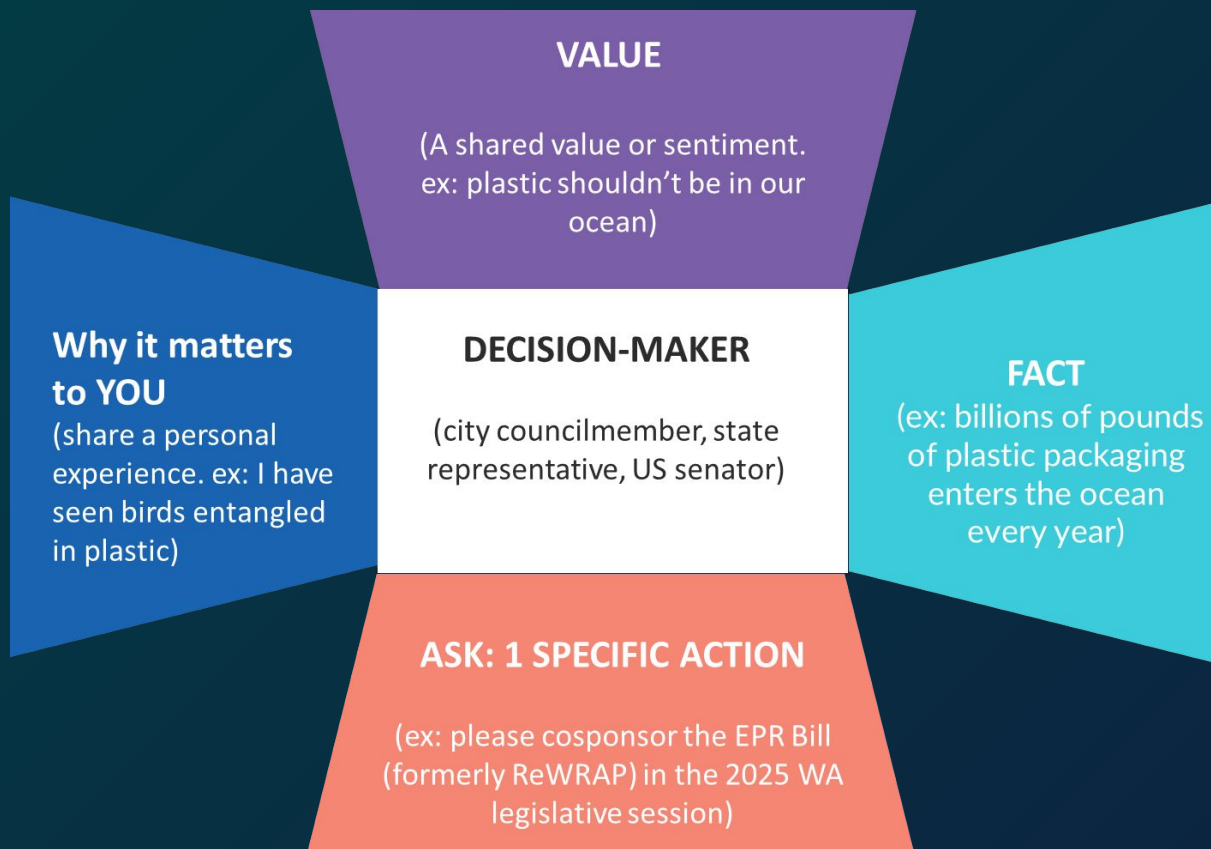
Youth Ocean Advocates

- Launched in 1994
- Enrolled in grades 9 – 12
- Training
- Volunteer activities



YOA Poli-SEA Trainings

- Why Policy Matters
- Mock Hearing
- Aquarium Policy Priorities
- Policy Messaging



Lobby Day

- Annual trip to Olympia
- Meetings with state legislators
- Rally
- Tour
- Hearings



Use the box but think outside it

- Their voice
- Their media
- Their passion



Letter to Editor (LTE)

To	A Person A Person A Person
Cc	A Person
Bcc	A Person
Subject	Bull Kelp For Our State Marine Forest (L#_)

Date, _____
Name of Editor, _____
Name of Publication, _____
Office Address, _____
City, State, Zip, _____

To the Editor of _____

Remarkably, Washington State is among the most biodiverse states. In the U.S. with ecosystems that are not only rare nationally, but globally. As one of the most prolific and foundational organisms to the marine environment, bull kelp forests hold immense cultural and environmental significance to the health of our communities. The biodiversity found in Puget Sound, which continues to rapidly decline with the effects of climate change, is thanks in large part to these incredible and productive underwater forests. In addition, they store carbon at a greater rate than coral reefs, seagrasses, and even tropical rainforests! Even in a weakened condition, Washington State's kelp forests uptake 27 to 150 metric tons of carbon per day, equivalent to the emissions of between 2,000-10,000 vehicles per year.

The first step in conservation efforts is recognition. Especially by the communities affected. (That means you!) That's why supporting the bill Bull Kelp For Our State Marine Forest (L#_) is vital for protecting these critical underwater forests. You can help by contacting your representatives and asking for their support and spreading the word for this collective action. Youth advocacy is invaluable to these efforts. I myself have joined the Kelp Our Washington campaign because I want to have the opportunity to make my voice heard. The climate crisis has been happening, and will continue to impact all youth. Early involvement is essential, so I'm encouraging all youth to do the same and get involved!

The more than 16,000 miles of land and water from the rocky shores of the San Juan Islands to the mudflats of the South Sound inlet, rely on critical bull kelp forests. With more than 80% of bull kelp forests lost in the last 50 years, legislative recognition is vital combating the passionless that conservation efforts often meet.

Bull Kelp Forests For State Marine Forest

This legislative session, a bill has been proposed to make bull kelp forests a Washington state symbol - but it won't pass without your help. Call or email your representatives in support of HB 1631! To follow this bill, sign up for the Seattle Aquarium's policy email alerts

Bull Kelp Forests

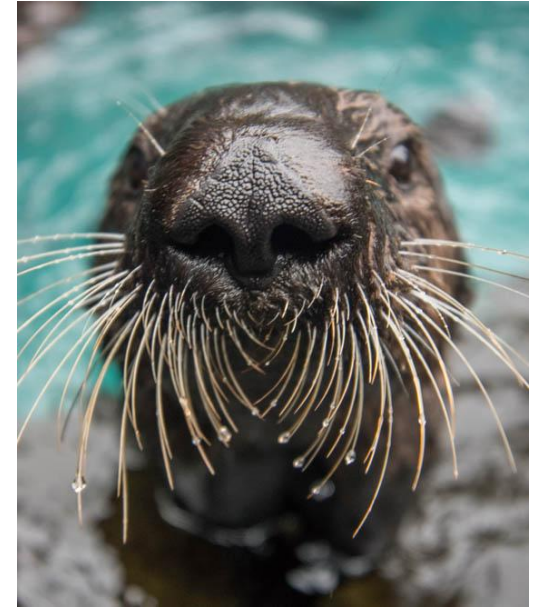
And why they matter

By Sebastian Ford

Beyond TikTok: Communication Skills for Youth



Generation	Smartphone Ownership	Daily Usage (Avg)	Key Behavior & Concerns
Gen Z	~95–98%	~4.5–6+ hrs/day	High dependency, frequent checks, social media-heavy
Gen Alpha	~94–95% by age 11	3–7+ hrs/day for many	Early immersion, gaming, YouTube, strong parental/educator involvement



Why originality matters in the age of AI and social media

1. Algorithms prioritize engagement
2. Audience fatigue with sameness
3. Virality depends on novelty
4. Long-term performance



Tech and style changes, storytelling doesn't

- Structure: Beginning, middle and end.
- Character: Someone or something to root for.
- Emotion: laugh, feel awe, or feel empathy = remembered and shared.



What else can zoos and aquariums offer?

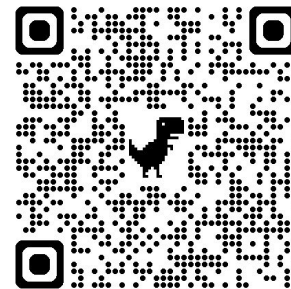
- **Media training** – professional editing, camerawork and production
- **Field visits** – experience conservation where it's happening
- **Elected tours** – make youth programs a stop when electeds visit
- **Media literacy** – navigate info stream, recognize misinformation, engage thoughtfully



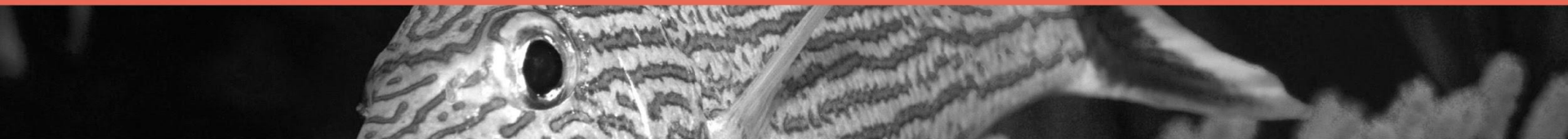
AZA Annual Conference

- CEC Open Session - Monday, Sept. 15
8:00am-12:00pm
- Youth Advocacy Session at AZA -
Tues, Sept. 16 2:00-3:30pm
- AZA Open Roundtable in Exhibit Hall -
Tues, Sept. 16 4:00-5:00pm

Support for
Youth Advocacy
Survey Link



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