

# Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Communities at Risk to be Involved in Eco-action

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# Introduction

Climate change and the rapid heating of our planet is something that we hear in the news almost every day. However, there is a disconnect between the action taken to preserve, conserve and/or support the environment and the people who perform these actions. This is fueled by stereotypes, beliefs and the perceived whiteness of eco-action which is preventing communities at risk from participating in eco-action leading to further damage to our planet. Furthermore, the lack of safe and inclusive spaces has increasingly pushed these communities to the sidelines (Angotti; Chollangi; Friedel; Gibson-Wood & Wakefield).

The lack of Canadian research, mention of Arabs and Middle Easterners, who make up a considerable portion of the immigrant and newcomer population, and other communities at risk were gaps noted in the literature.

The main objectives of this study were to learn and understand how to create safe and inclusive spaces for communities at risk to be involved in eco-action.

**Eco-action:** actions taken to conserve, preserve and/or support the environment.

## Situating Self in this Report

By situating myself in this report, I recognize and acknowledge that I am a coloured settler who lives, works, and plays on Indigenous land. This is important as I continue on the journey of decolonizing my mind and education. As a person born and raised in Canada with an Iraqi origin, I have always felt a strong disconnect in my identity. A disconnect that has followed into all parts of my life but most specifically in my education. There was a constant battle between choosing which identity to embrace more. It felt like if I embraced my Canadian identity, I would be less Iraqi and vice versa. As I got older, this disconnect continued to appear in my life until I discovered intersectionality. Along with that, decolonization of my mind and education has further helped me find my place in the world. Specifically, I had many conversations with anti-racist and decolonial scholar, Dr. Ranjan Datta, throughout the fellowship about finding our place in this land while also recognizing our responsibility as settlers, coloured settlers. This includes building a relationship with the land both physically and emotionally.

**Classism:** discriminatory practices and biases, for or against, based on socioeconomic status (see socioeconomic privilege) (CCDI).

As a young Muslim woman of colour in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), I naturally gravitated towards exploring the barriers that affected me growing up. These included **systemic racism**, funding, lack of a safe place that fostered diversity and relatability, **classism** and more. As I began to dive into the literature, there were a vast number of avenues that could be explored. Some of the main themes I noted and further explored were: **systemic racism**, **colonialism**, immigration, and **environmental racism**. Along with that, barriers like funding, transportation, language, familial responsibilities, lack of education and not enough time to participate were investigated. Themes and barriers that I did not have enough time to explore were: **ableism**, gender identity, heterosexism, cissexism, **sizeism** and others. Although I did not explicitly research these barriers, they still exist and need to be addressed.

**Environmental racism:** occurs when racialized communities are faced with unsafe, unhealthy environmental conditions in their neighbourhoods (eg. toxic waste facilities, landfills, etc.).

Through my research, I learned that there is a lack of accessible, diverse, inclusive and safe places for communities at risk to participate in eco-action, which is defined as action that supports/preserves/conserves the environment. Not only due to **systemic racism** but also due to lack of funding, transportation, education, opportunity and reliability/vulnerability.

**Ableism:** discrimination or exclusion based on conscious or unconscious beliefs that people with disabilities are less valued, and therefore less able to contribute and participate in society (CCDI).

**Sizeism:** discrimination based on beliefs and stereotypes related to a person's body size (CCDI).

# Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore barriers, stereotypes, and perceptions that communities at risk face when approaching eco-action in hopes of understanding how to create safe and inclusive spaces for these communities to be involved in eco-action. This project was carried out in collaboration with the Institute for Community and Prosperity, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) Southern Alberta, Dr. Ranjan Datta and a 4th-year General Science undergraduate student. The content in this report was composed using academic literature (peer-reviewed journal articles) and non-academic literature (news articles, reports from non-governmental organizations, interviews, workshops). The research was further supported by meetings and communication with CPAWS (Vanessa Bilan, Sheri Tarrington, Jaclyn Angotti) and Dr. Datta as well as multiple community engagement projects that included insights from youth facing barriers to eco-action.

Breaking down the research question:

## Safety and Inclusivity

- According to the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion (CCDI), a safe space is a space where people feel psychologically safe and can express their honest feelings, opinions and thoughts without fear of discrimination, judgment, or ridicule (CCDI).
- Inclusion is creating a culture that embraces, respects, accepts, and values diversity. It consists of a mindful and equitable effort that meets the needs of each individual so they feel valued, respected, and able to contribute to their fullest potential (CCDI).

## Communities at risk

- We are staying away from the term 'marginalized' as it creates the impression that the victims of the colonized system are to blame. However, it is because of **colonialism** that these communities are pushed to the sidelines and marginalized. We define victims of **systemic racism**, sexism, **ableism**, **colonialism**, etc. as part of communities at risk.

**Colonialism:** the practice of domination where one nation occupies land for the purpose of conquering and exploiting the colonized territory and its people (CCDI).



## What is Eco-action: Why we are not using the term 'environmentalism'

After extensive research and engagement with the community, it became clear that the term “environmentalism” is noninclusive. For one, it is a big word that is hard to define. Second, environmentalism has a complex and controversial history that is closely tied to the colonization of various regions around the world (Domínguez & Luoma). During the colonial era, European settlers exploited natural resources of the areas they colonized for their own economic gain (Domínguez & Luoma). Their methods were harmful to the environment and led to the displacement and marginalization of Indigenous peoples (Domínguez & Luoma).

As **colonialism** became more prevalent, so did the damage and overexploitation of resources. Only after seeing the damage they created did settlers begin to concern themselves with conservation. This type of conservation has been defined as “fortress conservation” by Domínguez and Luoma where it “inflict[s] real harm on Indigenous communities and overlooks sustainable solutions.” Fortress conservation focuses on animals and land and believes in order to conserve, the land must be void of human life (Domínguez & Luoma). This belief stems from another deeply rooted belief that many colonizers hold against Indigenous peoples which use harmful labels that perpetuate stereotypes of Indigenous people as uncivilized people that act in “irrational and destructive ways” that led to a loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation (Domínguez & Luoma). With a settler mindset and the need to commodify everything, colonizers believe that land must be cultivated in order to be owned. This need to cultivate the land (extraction of natural resources, widespread agriculture, commercial hunting, etc.) in order to own it has been one of the leading drivers of the global climate crisis today (Domínguez & Luoma).

As mentioned earlier, this colonial history follows environmentalism even today. This can be seen in a study done by Gibson-Wood and Wakefield which attempted to shed light on the experiences of Hispanic immigrants with environmentalism in Canada. They explain four interrelated “mechanisms of exclusion” that are identified in relation to environmentalism, they consist of economic marginalization, inaccessibility to participation opportunities, narrow definitions of environmentalism and lastly, the perceived whiteness that is associated with environmentalism (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield). Furthermore, the researchers mentioned that low levels of engagement are due to the narrow definitions of environmentalism that are available. This can be attributed to colonial mindsets, perceived whiteness, lack of access to the internet and computers, and expectations of what participation should look like (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield). Environmental justice professionals have highlighted the white, middle-class, male, heteronormative and ableist nature of mainstream environmentalism in the West still exists to this day (Bell 3-10; Taylor). Another study conducted by Schusler et al. which looked at the struggles and realities of Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) in undergraduate environmental programs found that there were many instances of professors perpetrating ‘white environmentalism’ by providing solutions that were often inapplicable in BIPOC communities.

It is clear that environmentalism is targeted towards a specific demographic, but in reality, the planet does not discriminate and needs the help and involvement of all individuals around the world. So what term should we use instead?

## What term should we use instead?

In an attempt to leave behind colonial ideologies, perceived whiteness, narrow definitions of environmentalism and introduce safety and inclusivity, I switched to the term 'eco-action.' In this research, I defined **eco-action as action that is taken to preserve, conserve, or support the environment.** Eco-action can look like taking a walk around your community while picking up litter, switching off the lights when they are not being used or participating in a community garden. Eco-action does not have to be switching to solar panels, being a paid researcher or being someone who has an extensive scientific background.

Although this term is still associated with environmentalism and its problematic nature, I decided to reclaim and revamp it based on my identity and learnings throughout this journey. The beauty of eco-action is that it should fit into your life rather than you trying to fit into it. This broad and openly-interpretable definition can be molded to fit into your life in a way that is comfortable for you. This led to the development of **intersectional eco-action** which I defined as an "inclusive approach to eco-action that works to protect both the individual and the planet by considering different parts of their identity."

**Intersectional eco-action:** an inclusive approach to eco-action that works to protect both the individual and the planet by considering different parts of their identity.



# What is Preventing Communities at Risk from Taking Eco-action: Barriers

My research uncovered many issues that communities at risk face in the practice of eco-action. A few of them being funding, finances, language, comfortability, vulnerability, inclusivity, and diversity.



## Funding



The lack of inclusive programming and the on-going perceived whiteness of environmentalism is still prevalent today. This can be seen when trying to get funding for BIPOC eco-action initiatives (Chollangi; Gibson-Wood & Wakefield; Jafri).

- In a 2022 interview, Founder of Colour the Trails, a BC-based nonprofit organization that works to create safe outdoor spaces for BIPOC individuals, Judy Kasiama expresses her frustration when it comes to applying for funding for her programs. Kasiama states that no matter how much effort they put into their applications they are not receiving funds because donors tend to prefer white-led organizations (Chollangi). The lack of funding for BIPOC programming is not only detrimental to the organizations themselves, but also for their participants as it prevents opportunities to occur. Researchers state that funding applications are too restrictive and require extensive deliverables that these organizations may not be able to produce (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield). They also highlight that the grants often do not recognize nor acknowledge the importance of promoting diversity and inclusion within eco-action (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield).
- Multicultural Trail Network (MTN), a Calgarian nonprofit organization that works to create meaningful outdoor experience for BIPOC, immigrant and newcomer youth mentions that a barrier to nature and nature-based programming is the access to transportation. MTN's programming takes place within the City of Calgary as well as in nearby areas like Kananaskis, in which participants are required to pay a fee that funding cannot cover. Through their programming, they hope to create a space that allows participants to connect with the land which will hopefully lead to a need to protect it, which is a form of eco-action in itself. They share that the transportation for 25 participants for a snowshoeing day trip costs \$660 (Multicultural Trail Network). This is not including the cost for snowshoe rentals, winter accessories or snacks which puts it at about \$1100 (Multicultural Trail Network). This is equivalent to about \$45 per person which can be quite hefty for communities at risk like low income families (Multicultural Trail Network).

Organizations like Colour the Trails and MTN work to create safe and inclusive spaces in the outdoors for communities at risk which leads to these individuals having the desire to preserve, conserve and support the environment.





## Finances

Financial barriers are yet another obstacle that communities at risk are facing when it comes to eco-action. For example, changing consumption patterns and household items (low-energy appliances) is not a realistic option for most communities at risk as they work endless hours to make ends meet each month (Chollangi; Gibson-Wood & Wakefield; Scott & Tenneti). This is a barrier that was identified multiple times during engagement with the community. This is also something I noticed when visiting my local grocery store when I came across \$12 environmentally-friendly aluminum paper while a few aisles down there was \$2 aluminum foil. Although communities at risk want to make the switch and be more environmentally-friendly, it is simply not a choice that many of them have. Along with that, when it comes to joining environmental groups, there are often membership and childcare fees during meetings which even further prevent the involvement of communities at risk (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield).

Newcomers and immigrants have said that they do not involve themselves in environmental issues because they simply cannot afford to worry about another thing (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield; Horolets). Unfortunately, newcomers and immigrants are worried about securing safe jobs, making sure they have a place to eat and live among other things (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield). They mentioned that environmentalism is a very Canadian, white thing to worry about (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield). Researchers find that the way media and companies promote environmentalism can be harmful (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield). By portraying a look that contains all high-end gear like Mountain Equipment Coop (MEC), people may steer away from eco-action. In the past, MEC has been criticized for a lack of diversity in their advertisements (Small). People not only feel like they don't have the necessary equipment to participate in outdoor activities, but also that the equipment is not meant for them to use anyway (Small).



## Language

Another barrier that communities at risk face when it comes to eco-action is the language barrier. The lack of translation creates a noninclusive and uncomfortable space for newcomers and immigrants. These individuals may not be able to participate in the ways that white-led organizations are wanting them to. For example, letter writing campaigns can be difficult for individuals whose first language is not English. This relates back to the claim that environmentalist models were created by white people and only for white people (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield). These models create expectations for how participation should look like which leads to potential power imbalances and discrimination. Newcomers and immigrants need information to be delivered personally, most often in their language and in a way that is culturally sensitive (Caidi et al.). This creates a sense of trust and inclusion for those facing language barriers.

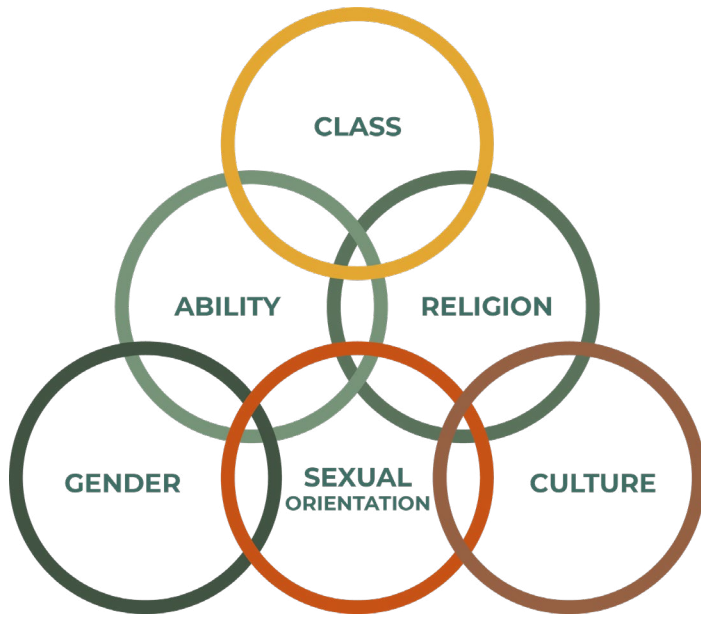


## Knowledge

Narrow definitions of environmentalism are one of the top reasons for low engagement among newcomer and immigrant populations (Gibson-Wood and Wakefield). This can be attributed to colonial mindsets, perceived whiteness, lack of access to the internet and computers, and expectations of what participation should look like (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield). This leads to the barrier of knowledge. Many individuals believe that environmentalism is limited to white-led groups because of their high education backgrounds, free time, financial stability and accessibility. Immigrants have pointed out they want to participate but not in the way they are being asked to (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield). This links back to the barriers that immigrants face like language, transportation, comfortableness, and vulnerability. The lack of accessibility and accommodation makes environmentalism unattractive to immigrant and newcomer communities (Angotti). This unfortunately leads to individuals missing out on the health and well-being benefits of being in nature. There is a need and urgency to work with communities at risk so they can reap the benefits of nature. For this to occur, it is vital to recognize that performing eco-action does not have to be switching to solar panels or collecting complicated data but rather, it can be contributing to a community garden or taking a walk around the community to explore and observe different bird and tree species while also collecting garbage. Along with that, immigrant and newcomer experiences in eco-action should be included and valued and not discarded just because they are not “Canadian experiences” (Gibson-Wood & Wakefield). Recent immigrants and newcomers in Canada have left their homes due to climate crises that are occurring in their home countries. Many of these individuals have experiences and perspectives that cannot be found elsewhere and deserve to be heard and considered.

The aforementioned barriers (funding, language, knowledge, financial, comfort) are all still very prevalent in Canada today and continue to impact the participation and inclusion of communities at risk.

# The Importance of Intersectionality in Eco-action



While engaging with the community, it was very clear that many of these stereotypes about the whiteness of eco-action are still prevalent. Individuals from communities at risk do not see themselves as eco-actionists because of stereotypes that are reinforced at school, in the media and in their communities (Schusler et al.). The lack of intersectionality and representation within this field is creating a damaging effect on today's youth. Leah Thomas, a Black environmentalist, advocate and author of *The Intersectional Environmentalist* (2022) states that if intersectionality is not embedded within environmentalism, the voices, experiences and ideas of BIPOC individuals will be ignored, erased and forgotten which can lead to more damage to the planet. A paper by Angotti, mentions that BIPOC students feel unsafe, unwelcomed, and unprepared in environmental settings due to **systemic racism**, colonial mindsets, and a lack of BIPOC mentors. Due to these factors, Angotti argues that mainstream outdoor and environmental education programs often erase BIPOC youths' experiences and realities. The importance of representation reappears when discussing the decolonization of eco-action, this claim is supported by a study conducted by Friedel that found that Cree youth in the Alberta Rockies desired outdoor experiences with Indigenous teachers who taught them based on teachings rooted in their culture and language (Friedel). This shows that if educators do not have a diverse and inclusive approach to eco-action, it results in disinterest from youth and the desire to not

participate. Along with that, when youth feel comfortable in the environment, it allows them to develop a sense of awareness, appreciation and an emotional connection to nature, all of which inspire them to protect it (Angotti). Again, these social interactions with fellow peers and mentors allow for environmental identity development based on youth experiences and intersections of their identities (Angotti).

**Systemic racism:** also known as institutional racism, refers to the ways that whiteness and white superiority become embedded in the policies and processes of an institution, resulting in a system that advantages white people and disadvantages communities at risk, notably in employment, education, justice, and social participation (University of British Columbia).

The report *Climate Change and Health Equity* by Macdonald et al. explores barriers to inclusion that newcomers, women, and youth face as a result of climate change. An important perspective that the authors bring to light is a woman's role in eco-action. The authors found that women are more likely to face structural barriers to equality like lower income, reduced opportunities to learn, work and access healthcare (Macdonald et al.). All of which make women more vulnerable to the effects of climate change (Macdonald et al.). It was noted that gender as a social determinant is often ignored when it comes to health risks due to climate change and how important the role of women are in healing the earth (Macdonald et al.). For example, in Indigenous communities, Indigenous women often miss meals in order to feed their families to avoid severe food insecurity (Macdonald et al.). This not only affects their physical health but also their mental health as they are faced with high levels of stress and anxiety (Macdonald et al.). This is just one example of how women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men. It was also found that women are more likely than men to take protective measures against warm temperatures than men (Macdonald et al.). They are also more likely to feel hopeful about the future (Macdonald et al.). This resilience shows how critical women are to the fight against climate change. Their experiences, perspectives, and intersectionality in their identities are absolutely vital to the decolonization and re-vamping of eco-action.

## How to Move Forward: What do communities at risk need? How to create safe and inclusive spaces?

**Acknowledge and address systemic racism:** In order to create safe and inclusive spaces for communities at risk to be involved in eco-action, it is important to acknowledge and address the colonialist and racist history of environmentalism and how it still perpetuates in the field today.

**Lead with empathy and respect:** Creating an environment where people can share their thoughts, experiences and perspectives about sensitive matters is essential. Many communities at risk have faced **environmental racism**, which is defined as unsafe and unhealthy environmental conditions in racialized and minority neighbourhoods (eg. toxic waste facilities, landfills, etc.) (MacDonald). This is a place where minorities are known to feel uncomfortable and vulnerable so fostering an environment where individuals can share without fear of judgment is vital.

**Amplify voices of individuals from minorities:** Many communities at risk have been historically excluded, ignored or silenced from the conversation around eco-action.

**Educate:** As mentioned earlier, narrow definitions of environmentalism have led to many newcomers/immigrants missing out on opportunities because they did not fit in the stereotypes or definitions. It is important to encourage everyone to bring their whole self to eco-action because the intersectionalities in their identities are invaluable and advance eco-action.

**Mindfulness and language:** Be mindful of the language and behaviour that may be exclusionary or discriminatory towards individuals from communities at risk. It is important to use inclusive language and avoid making assumptions or stereotypes.

**Prioritize accessibility:** Many of the barriers mentioned above were a matter of inaccessibility. Whether it is transportation, funding, language, or physical accessibility, these are all things that need to be incorporated in eco-action to foster safety and inclusivity.

**Create opportunities:** Creating local opportunities for communities at risk to participate in eco-action is the next step. Community gardens, walks around the neighborhood and conversations about current events are all inexpensive ways to engage the community and spark the conversation of eco-action. Applying for grants to enable nature-based experiences including hikes, survival skills, stewardship and nature-based wellness, with accessibility in mind including transportation and translators, is another way to engage eco-action and create a lasting impact.

# Local and National Efforts Being Taken to Create Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Communities at Risk to be Involved in Eco-action

## Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Southern Alberta (CPAWS):

CPAWS Southern Alberta Chapter has taken great strides to create diversity and inclusion in eco-action. They have many education programs that include elementary school students to high school students to newcomers to other communities at risk. They also host Indigenous-led walks around the Calgary area. CPAWS recently launched an online community called ChangeMakers, which seeks to engage and empower nations and neighborhoods alike. It is the perfect place for young individuals interested in getting involved in the community and eco-action to connect with other like-minded individuals.

In March of 2023, the Canadian Rockies Youth Network (CRYN) Summit took place at the Barrier Lake Field Station in Kananaskis. The Canadian Rockies Youth Summit is an educational leadership program that aims to provide hands-on learning opportunities for young people regarding wildlife and nature preservation, tourism, outdoor recreation, climate change, parks management, and meaningful reconciliation (CPAWS-SA). Since its inception in 2019, the Canadian Rockies Youth Summit has been led by High school students who have created learning experiences, networks, and events for other students across the province. CRYN predominantly supports three priority areas (CPAWS-SA). The project offers opportunities for youth to gain knowledge about these subjects, participate in management decisions, volunteer for protection and restoration efforts, and create tangible climate and eco-action projects (CPAWS-SA).

## Canadian Wilderness Stewardship Program (CWSP):

The Canadian Wilderness Stewardship Program (CWSP) aims to motivate the upcoming generation of youth in Canada to become environmental stewards by connecting them to nature and their local communities.

The three core components of the program are:

1. A CPAWS-led expedition of a regional watershed in need of protection;
2. Participant-led, volunteer community service projects focused on conservation or education; and
3. A summit where participants share knowledge and develop skills in civic engagement, conservation, leadership, and advocacy.

The program involves expeditions led by CPAWS chapter staff and experienced guiding companies that include hiking and/or paddling in the participant's local area. (CWSP-CPAWS). Additionally, the CPAWS staff provides guidance to the participants in designing their community service projects. At the end of the program, there is a summit where participants can meet and interact with other like-minded individuals, share their projects, and develop skills to further their conservation and eco-action efforts. (CWSP-CPAWS).

## Multicultural Trail Network (MTN):

Multicultural Trail Network (MTN) is Canada's first non-profit that aims to "empower diverse youth by providing them with access to the great outdoors." Their programs "support all youth facing racial and cultural discrimination, including those identifying as BIPOC, refugees, and immigrants" (MTN). Although MTN does not work directly in the field of eco-action, they are actively involved in creating safe and inclusive spaces for communities at risk in the outdoors. Through this, they hope to inspire their participants to create a connection with the land, in turn leading to a desire to protect it, which is an eco-action in itself.

## Canadian Conservation Corps (CCC):

The CCC is an immersive 3-part conservation program available to all Canadians, permanent residents and/or refugees aged 18-30. It is funded by the Government of Canada and completely free-of-charge for participants. The CCC does not have any educational prerequisites as it is intended to provide an exciting opportunity for young Canadians looking for meaningful experiences to help advance their skillset (CCC), specifically in the field of conservation and eco-action.

# Closing remarks

To conclude, it is clear that there is a lack of safe and inclusive spaces for communities at risk to be involved in eco-action, hence this report. The barriers to participation that these communities face are related to funding, finances, knowledge and language. Narrow definitions of what eco-action looks like, its colonial history, stereotypes and the perceived whiteness of eco-action are still prevalent today. However, the introduction of intersectionality within eco-action can change that. With their unique perspectives and intersectionalities in their identities, communities at risk bring invaluable ideas, solutions and experiences to the table. It is now a matter of how to create these safe and inclusive spaces. Some steps that can be taken are to acknowledge and address **systemic racism** and how that has impacted these communities. Facilitators should also lead with empathy and respect, amplify the voices of members from communities at risk, educate and be mindful of the language you use, prioritize accessibility like making sure that there is affordable transportation, translators and a comfortable space where individuals can share their experiences and lastly, to create opportunities.

Through this entire journey, there have been many highs and lows. Many wins and celebrations but also moments of struggle and defeat. This journey contained much self-growth, reflection, learning, healing, discovering the truth, decolonizing my mind, creating life-long relationships, and connections. This journey was also very hope-inducing as I met so many amazing people who are dedicated to saving the planet and bringing their whole selves to eco-action. There is hope for a greater, brighter, and sustainable future. One that is led by the amazing youth of today. Thank you for taking the time to read my report and I hope you feel empowered to take eco-action in your life.

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