

## Serve Learn Earn Testimony

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Hello, my name is Kim Guertin. I work for Audubon Vermont as the Center Director at the Green Mountain Audubon Center, in Huntington. I have worked for Audubon for more than 20 years and care very deeply about our mission to protect birds and the places they need today and tomorrow, especially here in Vermont. One way we will do that, is to build a diverse conservation workforce that will protect the natural places that birds and people need to thrive well into the future. This is why Audubon is a part of Serve Learn Earn.

Over the last three years, Audubon has invested time, effort and resources in building a strong Youth Conservation Leadership Program that deeply engages diverse teens and young adults in our conservation, education, and advocacy work. More specifically, our programs employ youth through AmeriCorps positions, Internships, a Jr. Conservation Technician program for teens, and employment at our summer day camps as teen Counselors-in-Training and Seasonal Educators.

Before Serve Learn Earn, Audubon offered just five unpaid internship opportunities and one AmeriCorps service position each year. Our internship program was strong, but it was only available to those who could afford it. Today, thanks to the generous public funding the SLE coalition has received, Audubon is now offering more than 40 youth and young adults paid training and service opportunities each year and they all receive a minimum of \$15 per hour.

Serve Learn Earn programming at Audubon is training youth in environmental stewardship and inspiring their interest in a career in conservation or environmental education. Program participants gain on-the-job training, sharpened workforce skills, and a greatly expanded professional network, through the SLE partners and Audubon's conservation community nationwide.

I know there is an interest on this committee in hearing about what skills our program participants gain. For many of the teens (ages 14-18) we work with through our Jr. Conservation Technician or Counselor-In-Training (CIT) Programs, they are often applying for a first job. They have to submit a resume and go through their first interview process. Once hired, they learn to set goals and work as part of team. Our CITs build their natural history knowledge and learn how to share that knowledge with others. They also learn how to manage a group and how to build engaging lesson plans. Teens in our programs work alongside Audubon's staff on a daily basis.

Teens in our Jr. Conservation Tech program complete conservation and trail projects that require working with hand-tools, and they learn invasive plant and tree identification. Last spring and summer, they worked to research native plants, mapped out a garden site and then worked with our Ecology Day Campers to install a new *Plants for Birds Garden* at the Center. This project will benefit birds and pollinators for years to come and they took pride in knowing they were making a difference. We were excited to see some of our teen alumni go on to take jobs with VYCC on a conservation crew and we are exploring ways we can create a more direct pathway between our programs.

Our Conservation Interns, who are in college, learn bird-monitoring techniques, some learn to band birds, others learn to use GIS and mapping software, they conduct forest inventories, habitat assessments and learn to write land management plans. These skills, learned through active participation with an Audubon Conservation Biologist, are directly applicable to real life work in conservation. We have seen our interns and AmeriCorps members move into jobs at the Vermont Agency of Transportation, The Vermont Agency of Agriculture and the Vermont Center for EcoStudies. We have seen alumni become teachers at Champlain Valley Union High School, Williston Central School, and Shelburne Farms. We have even hired two AmeriCorps members into full-time roles on our Audubon education team, and these are just examples of some of our alumni finding work in Vermont.

All of Audubon's programs give youth exposure to different types of work and careers in conservation. Conservation needs the next generation of leaders to be prepared to help solve the daunting environmental challenges of our time. That is why Audubon is investing in our youth and providing experiences, they need to discover their true passions and make critical career decisions. We are helping to move these young professionals into the conservation workforce. It is exciting to work as a part of the SLE coalition as we continue to build a training program that will have lasting, impacts on Vermont's wildlife, our communities and our natural landscapes.

Thank you for your time and for your ongoing support.