



TRCA Youth Council Annual Report 2023-2024 Term

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world, youth councils have been created by governments, community groups, and non-profit organizations as a means of providing local youth with an opportunity to gain important skills, build capacity, and network, while providing the sponsoring agencies with important input and perspectives from youth stakeholders. The long-term success of efforts to advance environmental protection and sustainability in the Toronto region depends on the support of the region's youth, both now and into the future. The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) Community Engagement Strategy (2017) recommends more focused engagement of youth to enhance the reach of TRCA programs and activities and prepare the next generation of conservation leaders (Actions 6.1 and 6.2). Activities of TRCA's Youth Council build on existing engagement programs while deploying tools and strategies to develop a strong network of youth driven to take active ownership of their local environment.

The Youth Council reports directly to the Regional Watershed Alliance (RWA). The mission, mandate and goals of the Youth Council were developed by TRCA and the RWA, in consultation with relevant stakeholders. At Regional Watershed Alliance Meeting #1/2017, held on November 15th, 2017, Resolution #R002/17 was approved, in part, as follows:

WHEREAS THE Terms of Reference of the Regional Watershed Alliance proposes the establishment of Watershed/Working Groups, Youth Council, and Indigenous Liaison Committee;

THEREFORE LET IT BE RESOLVED THAT the following members of the Alliance [the RWA Working Group] work with staff to lead the establishment of Youth Council including development of Terms of Reference:

- a. Lisette Mallet; b) Amory Ngan; c) Rui Felix; d) Mick Malowany; and e) Karen Lockridge.

This report provides an overview of the 2023-2024 Youth Council program, recruitment of new Executives, workplan, and finally a program evaluation and recommendations for program improvement.

PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

There are two methods to participate in the Youth Council program; youth can register as General or Executive member. General member participation is entirely voluntary and General members can take part in activities if they wish. They are notified of events and initiatives and can elect to participate. Members of the Executive are an application-based volunteer position. Youth Council Executives are expected to volunteer approximately 4- 5 hours per month and maintain correspondence with relevant TRCA staff and the rest of the Executive. With TRCA staff guidance, the Executive develop a workplan for the year and choose what topics and initiatives to pursue. The intake for General members is open year-round, while the applications for the Executive only open for approximately one month annually.

The program framework for the Youth Council was created through a collaborative process between TRCA staff and Regional Watershed Alliance working group members. The program framework remains the same as it did in 2017 when it was developed.

The framework is intentionally open-ended so that Youth Council Executive members can develop their own project ideas to meet program goals. The overarching goal of the Youth Council is to build healthy communities. This is achieved through four program objectives:

- a) Identify youth perspectives by developing an understanding of youth opinion around current environmental issues and how these might be incorporated in the work of TRCA and its partners;
- b) Build a youth network/strengthen existing networks through creation of a broad network of youth in the region that is interested in environmental and sustainability issues;
- c) Build capacity and engage youth by providing youth across the Toronto region with learning opportunities; and
- d) Create fun opportunities for youth through entertaining and engaging learning opportunities.

For a more fulsome discussion of program development and rationale please see the 2018-2019 Youth Council Annual Report.

A term for the Youth Council Executive begins and ends in March, with the current term being reported on running from March 2023 to March 2024. There is an intentional one month overlap between new and departing Executive members to allow for knowledge transfer.

DEFINITION OF YOUTH

The term “youth” has no consistent definition. Depending on program goals the target audience of “youth” may consider only high school students or may consider older groups all the way up to university graduates and young professionals. The original program framework for TRCA’s Youth Council set the age threshold as 16 to 24 years old. It was noted, however, that the demographics of youth recruited in those first few months skewed heavily towards a majority of female identifying (“female”) members. After consulting with TRCA’s Education and Training Division, as well as with the Regional Watershed Alliance, the decision was made in 2019 to expand the age cut-off to 30 years old, as statistics provided by Education and Training staff has found that male identifying youth (“males”) are more likely to volunteer when they are older. Ongoing data collection in the years since increasing the age allowance shows the gender distribution gap lessening, although a disparity remains between the number of males and females that register (Figure 1). The age distribution of registrants shows a bimodal distribution for females, with a peak in high school ages and another at the ages common for recent graduates of university. For males, there is a steady number of registrants spread throughout the target age range (Figure 2). The expanded TRCA Youth Council target age range also allows for valuable peer mentorship between Executive members and for event programming to target audiences in various life stages.

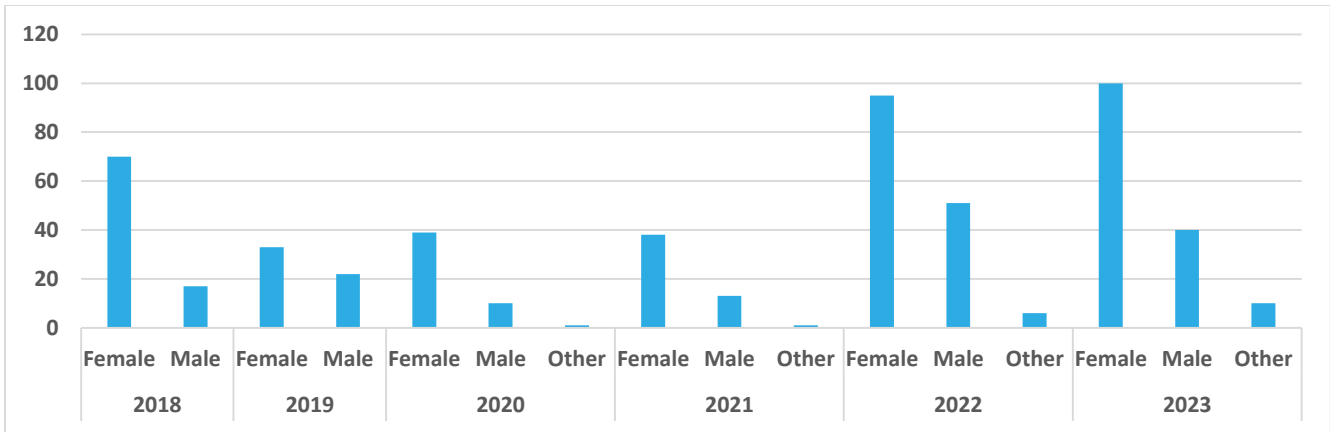


FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF REGISTRANTS BY GENDER AND YEAR

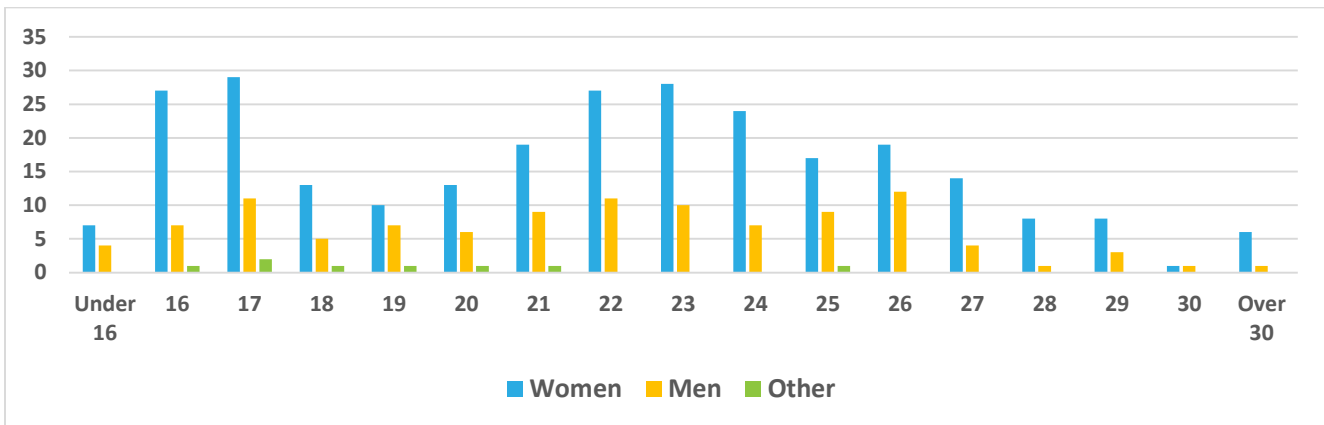


FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF REGISTRANTS BY GENDER AND AGE

Recruitment General membership recruitment is open year-round on the TRCA Youth Council webpage. In the calendar year of 2023, the number of registrants increased by 150 members, from 396 to a total of 505 (this accounts for members that are now over the age of 30 and no longer eligible to be members).

Recruitment for the Youth Council Executive was open from December 19, 2022, through to January 31, 2023. Three members of the 2022-2023 Youth Council Executive elected to continue for a second term, resulting in seven vacancies. 28 applications were received this round (compared to 16 for 2022, 24 for 2021, 31 for 2019, and 19 for 2018). Of these 28 applications, it was deemed that 26 applicants met the minimum criteria for Youth Council Executive membership based on age and residential or school attendance location within TRCA’s jurisdiction.

Youth Council Executive applications were reviewed by relevant program staff and by exiting members of the Youth Council Executive ineligible to continue due to the two-year term limit. Considerations for the selection of Executive members included: merit based on the quality of application, representation from across the jurisdiction, and demographic factors. Responses to short answer questions were weighted more heavily than other factors. Age was also factored into the assessment of their experience and writing level, as applicants

ranged from high school to post-graduate level students and young professionals. Furthermore, since there is a large age distribution, and since there has historically been less representation from the younger cohorts, two spaces were once again intentionally reserved for high school-aged applicants. It was decided not to hold interviews, as the role is volunteer based, and it would be difficult and time-consuming to schedule. The new Executive was selected in February 2023, with the final list of Executives brought to the RWA for approval at the RWA meeting held March 22, 2023 (RES.#5/23). Two members resigned from the Executive in June and August, due to illness and time constraints due to employment respectively. The decision was made to recruit for the position that became vacant in June, but ultimately the August vacancy remained vacant due to timing. The Executive operated with 9 members for most of this term.

Geographic representation on the Youth Council (both General and Executive) varies across TRCA’s jurisdiction, with the majority of registrants in Toronto, Brampton, Vaughan, and then Markham (Figure 4). This representation is a result of population and post-secondary institution distribution across the jurisdiction. In an effort to maintain diversity (geographically and demographically), specific outreach to communities that are less represented continues to be made through the assistance of members of the Regional Watershed Alliance, municipal partners, other youth groups and councils, and agencies that work specifically with different communities with some success. For example, due to targeted outreach by Regional Watershed Alliance member and City of Pickering Councillor David Pickles (Ward 3 of Pickering), we did see an increase in membership from Pickering, which demonstrates the benefits of targeted outreach for specific membership needs.

As many initiatives led by the Youth Council in 2023 continued to be held online, the application form for Youth Council General membership, which includes access to the monthly Youth Council newsletter, did not restrict individuals from applying if they resided outside of TRCA’s jurisdiction. Hosting virtual events and increasing outreach efforts through social media, monthly newsletters, and personal communications were a focus of the 2023-2024 term and contributed positively to the increased number of Youth Council General members. Interestingly, recruitment efforts and virtual events resulted in an increase in interest from youth outside of TRCA’s jurisdiction, including across Canada. It is also possible for youth to reside outside of TRCA jurisdiction but attend school within the Toronto Region.

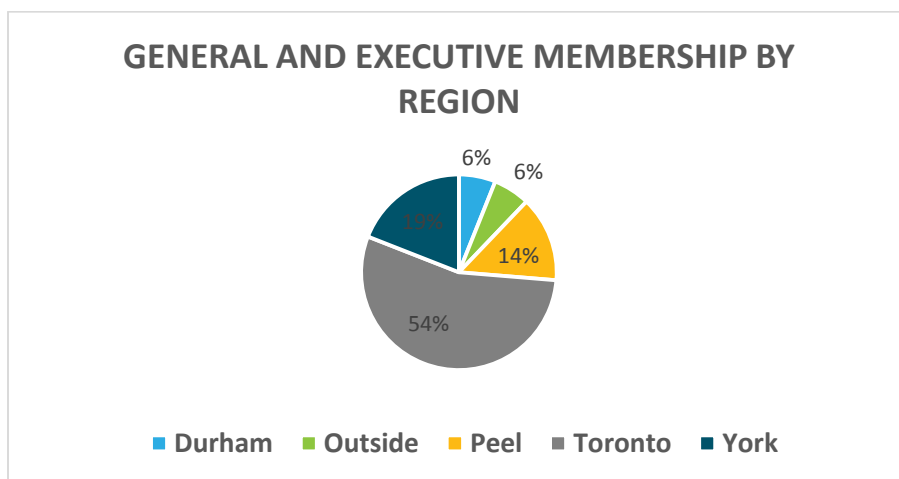


FIGURE 3: REGIONAL LOCATIONS OF YOUTH COUNCIL MEMBERS (BOTH GENERAL AND EXECUTIVE)

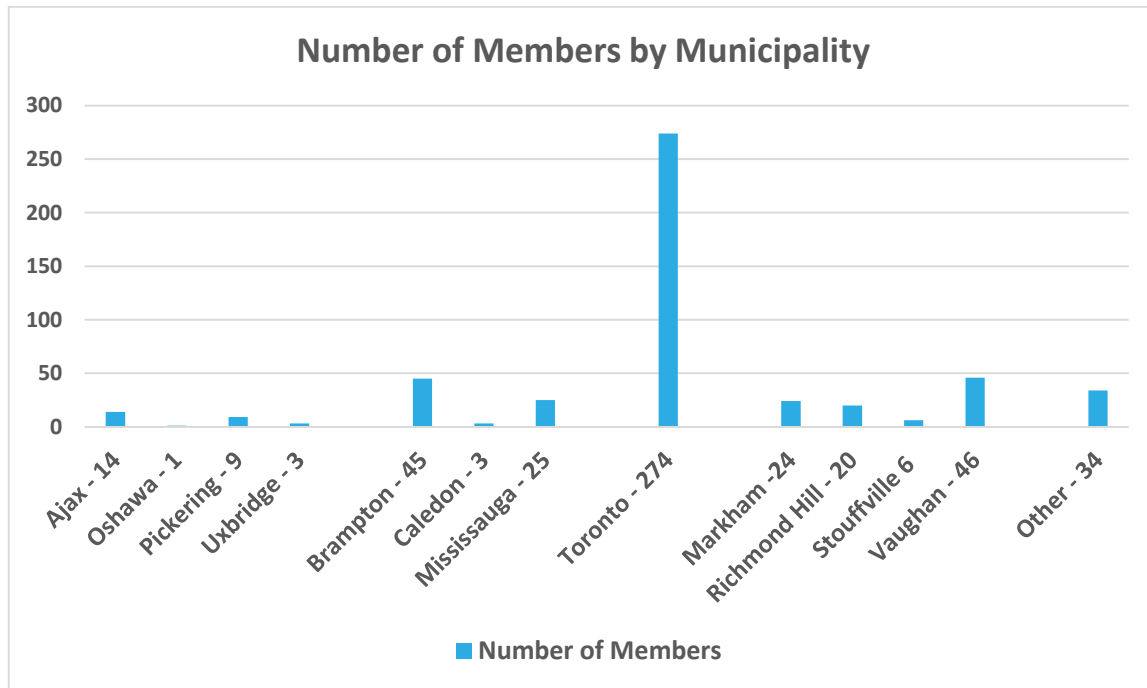


FIGURE 4: MUNICIPAL LOCATIONS OF YOUTH COUNCIL MEMBERS (BOTH GENERAL AND EXECUTIVE)

IMPACT OF COVID-19

As health and safety restrictions were further reduced in 2023, the Youth Council was able to return to in-person programming for hands-on events but continued operating in a hybrid capacity to allow for a larger audience for virtual town hall and monthly meetings. Virtual formats for meetings and webinars continued to be preferred by the Executive for time and cost savings, while place-based and hands-on activities seemed to be the preferred format for events that the Executive planned. Familiarity with online meeting platforms and etiquette is now commonplace and the various Executive members who chaired the monthly meetings used a variety of information sharing platforms at meetings including Jamboard and Mentimeter.

YOUTH COUNCIL EXECUTIVE RETREAT

Youth Council Executive members met monthly through online meetings, as well as organized and attended various events and initiatives. In July 2023, five of the nine Youth Council Executive members and 3 additional General members attended a day-long retreat at the Medicine Wheel Garden at Heart Lake Conservation Park (HLCP). Despite a very rainy day, the retreat was an overall success and provided a great space for the Executive members to meet in-person, as well as an opportunity for General members to get involved. The day began with an ice breaker game, followed by drumming and stewardship activities at the garden (Photo 1), including planting, mulching, and weeding. Woven through the retreat was Indigenous teachings by Four Colours Drum Circle – stewards of the HLCP Medicine Wheel Garden. Two Executive members led an afternoon art activity (Photo 2), transferring plant materials onto canvas surfaces, accompanied by a roundtable discussion about the goals and objectives of the TRCA Youth Council.



PHOTOS 1 AND 2: LEFT, YOUTH COUNCIL EXECUTIVE MEMBERS AT KORTRIGHT CENTRE FOR CONSERVATION. RIGHT, YOUTH COUNCIL EXECUTIVE MEMBERS PARTICIPATING IN AN NATURE BASED ART ACTIVITY AND 2023-2024 WORK PLANNING

The discussion was centered around the results of an online survey question circulated to the group in advance of the retreat. The question was: **From the following event ideas, which ones would you have the most interest in?** The survey results are seen below. (Table 1)

TABLE 1: INTEREST IN SHORT LIST OF YOUTH COUNCIL 2023-24 EVENT IDEAS FROM KICK OFF MEETING

Short List of Event Ideas from Kick Off Meeting	Total % of Respondents Interested
Fungi education/foraging/guided walks	64%
Guided tours of recycling plants/sustainable buildings	64%
Education on permaculture implementation practices	55%
Guided education hikes of green spaces/urban parks	36%
Nature inspired/litter art project	18%
Urban farm site visit	18%
Join/promote community science projects	9%
Pollinator education initiatives	9%
Zero-waste cooking/scrap food alternative use tutorials	9%

The discussion centered on work planning for initiatives and events which the Executive wanted to plan or be a part of for 2023. Major themes that emerged included the following:

- The Youth Council Executive remain passionate and driven about raising awareness of environmental issues and participating in action on climate change, education, and inclusivity in the conservation sector;
- Interest in hosting increased Town Hall Meetings, thus engaging more with the General membership on a consistent basis; and
- Hosting fun and educational events, with a focus on in-person events should continue to be focus

Major themes for improvement, which were also mentioned in the recommendations from the 2022-2023 Youth Council annual report, included:

- Increasing engagement with the General members of the Youth Council;
- Spreading marketing and outreach efforts to a larger demographic (such as through schools); and
- Increasing opportunities for youth to participate in, or provide input on, TRCA work.

WORKPLAN: GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The broad goals and objectives outlined in the program framework remained the same from previous years. The following section outlines the initiatives created and delivered by the 2023-2024 Executive, and how they addressed program goals and objectives.

Objective: Learn About What is Important to Youth

Youth Council Intake Survey

All members, whether they are applying for the Executive or as a General member, complete a survey as they register. The same survey has been used for the duration of the Youth Council program for consistency. Registrants are asked demographic questions and to select their top five interests from a list of 25 different topics. Topics include a range of sustainability, environmental, and social issues. For a more detailed description of the rationale for the selection of those topics and survey questions, see the TRCA Youth Council 2018-19 Annual Report.

Results

Demographics

Youth Council members are mostly from Toronto (54%,

FIGURE 3: REGIONAL LOCATIONS OF YOUTH COUNCIL MEMBERS (BOTH GENERAL AND EXECUTIVE)

3) and are mostly in their high school years and early to mid-twenties (Figure 5). This is reflective of the strong connection between engaged youth and key academic phases of their lives. An increase was also seen again this term in high school-aged students aged 18 and under, possibly a result of having two current Executive members in high school themselves. There also was an increase seen in the 27-30 age group. As has been the ongoing trend, the Youth Council membership is comprised of more females (69%) than males (28%). An increase in members who identify as genders other than male or female has increased from 1% in 2022 to 3% in 2023.

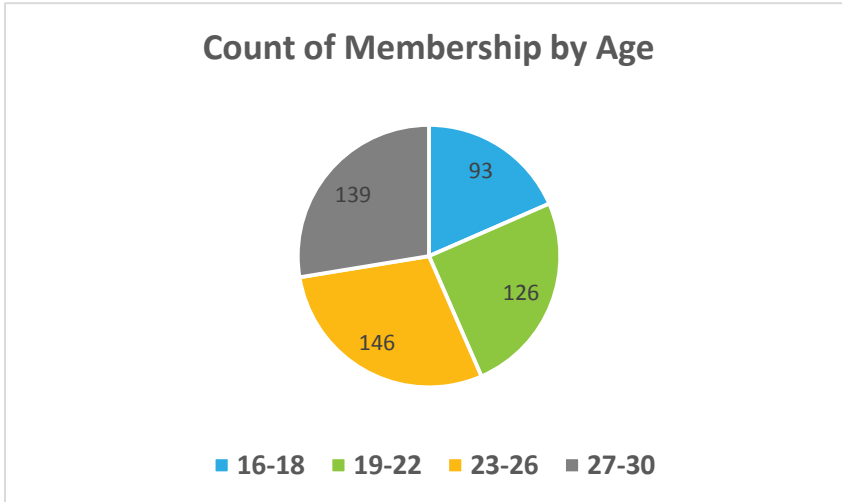


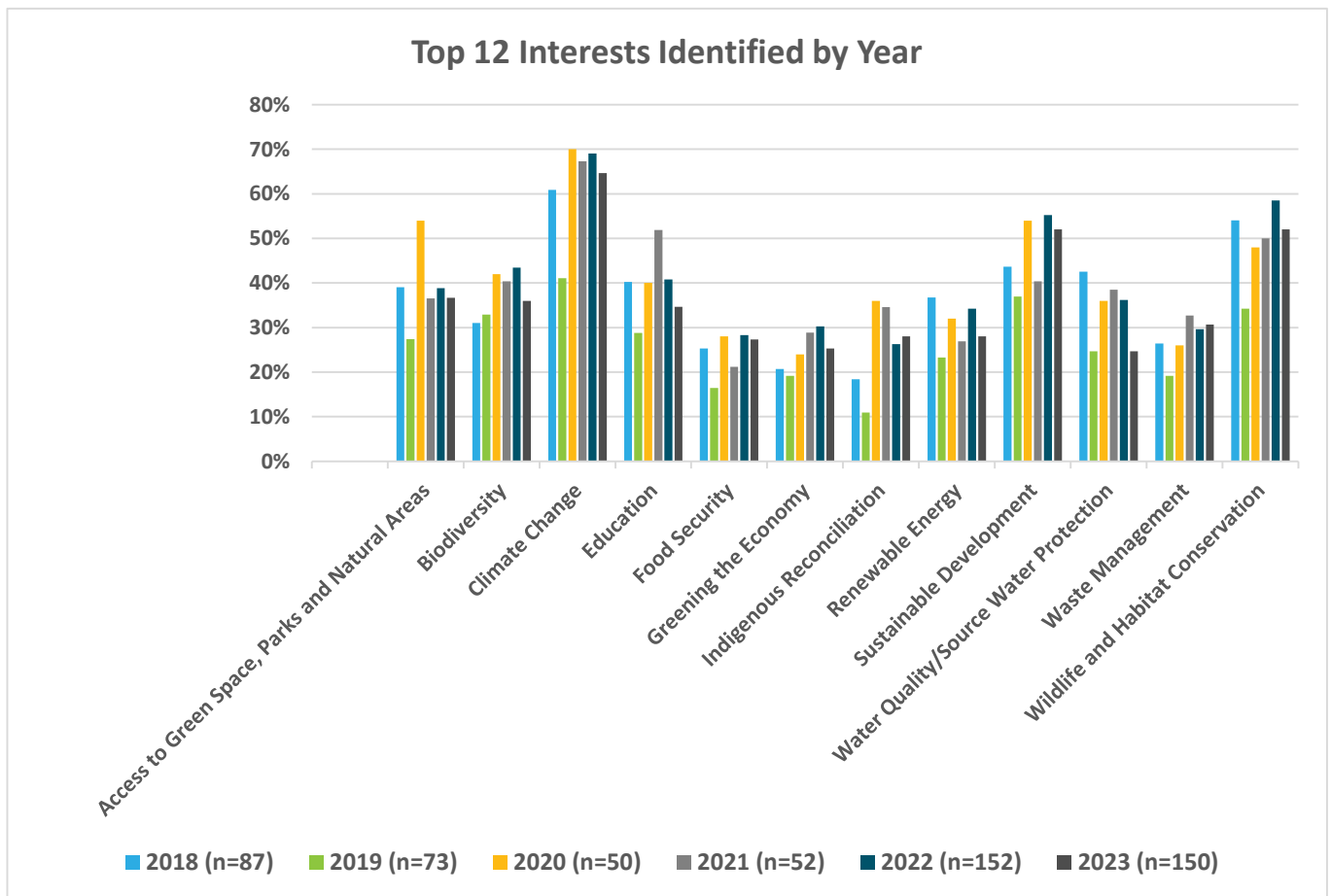
FIGURE 5: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF MEMBERSHIP

Most Important Issues

Registrants were instructed to select the top five most important issues to them from a list. Some respondents elected to choose more than five, and those additional answers were recorded. Respondents do not rank their selections; therefore the number of times an item was selected is used to indicate its overall importance to the entire group.

Aggregated responses were similar to last year (Figures 6 and 7), where climate change was once again the most frequently selected topic throughout TRCA’s jurisdiction. Indigenous reconciliation and waste management are topics that both saw increases in interest in 2023. We see a continued interest in wildlife and habitat conservation, biodiversity, access to green space, and sustainable development.

FIGURE 6: MEMBER SELECTION OF TOP 12 TOPICS BY YEAR



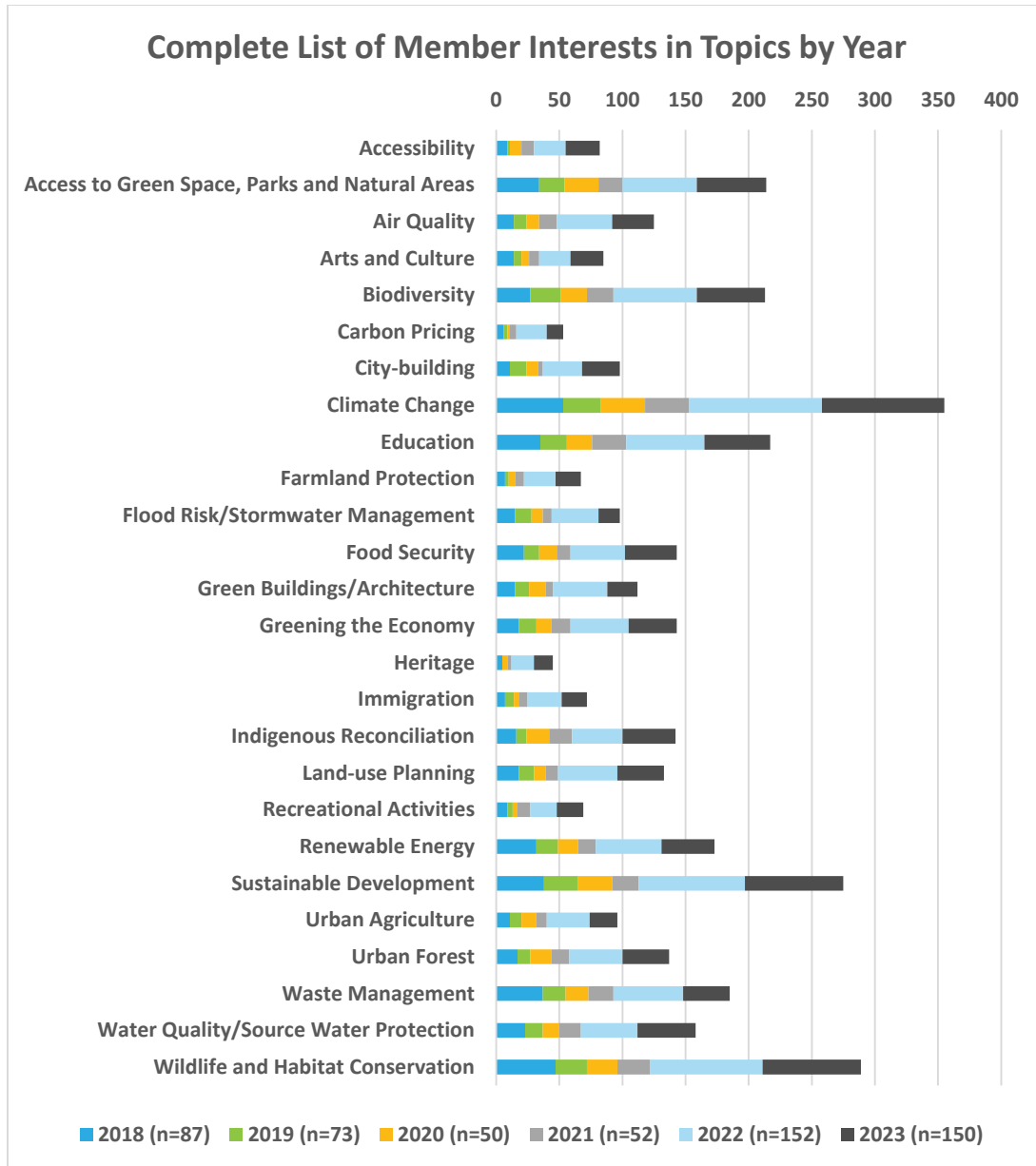


FIGURE 7: MEMBER SELECTION OF COMPLETE LIST OF TOPICS BY YEAR

Objective: Build a Youth Network

As a new Government and Community Relations Coordinator was brought on in March 2023, the support for outreach increased once again. The Executive supported creation of monthly newsletters (10 in 2023) by providing content and feedback. Each month, the newsletter was drafted and submitted for edits by an individual Executive member, allowing for invaluable experience and an opportunity to express/share issues of interest with the larger network and to work with TRCA staff on messaging. The newsletter items were often

forwarded to other TRCA program staff in education and public engagement, as well as to external youth groups, which increased the reach of Youth Council events and initiatives. Marketing efforts also included posts on all TRCA platforms, including TRCA Events and Youth Council Events calendars, multiple social media platforms, as well as targeted distribution of events to specific internal and external groups. Two Youth Council Executives also contributed testimonials that were featured on social media (Photos 3 and 4).

The reach of the TRCA Youth Council broadened greatly with opportunities to engage with groups internally at TRCA and externally. Internally, one Youth Council Executive member was represented at both TRCA's Bike the Creek signature event in June 2023 and at TRCA's Adventures of Salmon signature event in September 2023. Externally, we had one Youth Council Executive member represent the Council at an Earth Day Cleanup Event held by MPP McGregor (Brampton North). The Youth Council collaborated with MP Sorbara's Vaughan-Woodbridge Youth Council in August 2023 to host a buckthorn removal stewardship event in Vaughan, as well as hosted them at a Fall Friends Planting Event in October 2023 at an active TRCA restoration site (Teston/400). As in years past, Executive members were invited to attend and speak on a panel at the Peel Climate Action Leadership Retreat at Albion Hills Conservation Park for an audience of 24 high school students. Executive members were also invited to attend and co-facilitate an Urban Nature Biodiversity Workshop with the University of Toronto. Groups that the TRCA Youth Council partnered with for events or initiatives for the 2023/2024 term included: Toronto Nature Now Radio Show, Four Colours Drum Circle, Mycological Society of Toronto, University of Toronto, Skills for Change, Brampton Environmental Alliance, Toronto Zoo Climate Action Learning and Leadership Program, MP Francesco Sorbara Youth Council (Vaughan-Woodbridge riding), MPP McGregor's Office (Brampton North riding), Canadian Wildlife Federation (Canadian Conservation Corps) and Toronto Environmental Youth Council.



PHOTOS 3 AND 4: SOCIAL MEDIA TESTIMONIALS FEATURING YOUTH COUNCIL EXECUTIVE MEMBERS SHATABDY ZAHID AND MALHAR PATEL

Objective: Build Capacity and Engage Youth with Learning Opportunities

The Youth Council Executive was able to organize and host a number of both virtual and in-person events and learning opportunities throughout 2023. The following two sections provide brief overviews of each activity hosted by the 2023-2024 Youth Council Executive, categorized as either “Building Youth Capacity and Learning Opportunities” or “Fun Opportunities”.

TRCA Youth Council Virtual Town Hall – Pathways into Green Employment (June 2023)

Building upon the recommendations to further integrate the Executive members with the General members, as well as with the work of TRCA staff, the Executive planned several virtual town halls during their term, beginning with “Pathways into Green Employment”. Several unique pathway opportunities into the field of green employment were showcased by guest speakers, including the following: Toronto Zoo Climate Action Learning and Leadership Program, Canadian Conservation Corps Program (CCC), and several TRCA Youth Programs (Newcomer Youth Greening Economy Project, Girls Can Too, Conservation Youth Corps). This town hall was attended by 17 people (8 Executive members/9 general members). One of our Executives presented their experience with the CCC in years past, and another current Executive has since applied and was accepted into the program for 2023.

Participation in the Etobicoke Creek Watershed Plan Highlight Video (September 2023)

Youth Council Executive members were invited by TRCA’s Watershed Planning and Reporting team to participate in the filming of the Etobicoke Creek Watershed Plan Highlight Video. One Executive member participated, meeting with the production team at a location within the watershed, and gained experience in front of the camera, while advocating and educating on the health of the Etobicoke Creek Watershed.

Peel Climate Action Leadership Retreat (September 2023)

TRCA’s Peel Education Team hosted an overnight Climate Action Leadership Retreat for 24 high school students and invited the Youth Council to provide a workshop. Along with TRCA staff, one Executive member presented on the Youth Council, various events the Youth Council has hosted, and how they got involved in climate action in order to inspire students. Students were invited to participate in a dotmocracy activity (Photo 5) to identify their environmental interests and assist students in coming up with ideas to implement climate action in their community.

PHOTO 5: STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN A DOTMOCRACY ACTIVITY



Heart Lake Conservation Park Truth and Reconciliation Event (September 2023)

Guided by the Four Colours Drum Circle, approximately 200 community members (Photo 6) participated in Indigenous learning, reflection, and a Round Dance at the Heart Lake Conservation Park Medicine Wheel Garden on September 30, 2023. Participants, including two Youth Council Executive volunteers, drummed and sang while attaching orange ribbons to a tree, in memory of the Indigenous children who lost so much through the residential school system.



PHOTO 6: COMMUNITY MEMBERS GATHERED TOGETHER TO OBSERVE THE NATIONAL DAY FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

Regional Watershed Alliance Flood Infrastructure Tour (October 2023)

Youth Council Executive members were invited by TRCA's Regional Watershed Alliance (RWA) to attend a tour of TRCA's flood infrastructure on October 11, 2023. The tour included stops at Claireville Dam and G. Ross Lord Reservoir and Dam. While only one Executive member attended, it proved a great opportunity for the member to learn more about TRCA work and flood infrastructure, as well as to learn more about the RWA and meet some of its members.

TRCA Youth Council Virtual Town Hall – Controlled Burns at TRCA Alto Meadows (October 2023)

The Youth Council hosted Thiyah Siva, Environmental Technologist with TRCA's Restoration and Resource Management Team for a presentation on TRCA's 2023 Alto Meadow Controlled Burn. Topics covered included learning what a controlled burn is, its purpose and benefits, the planning process for controlled burns, as well as long term management strategies and future planned activity. There may also be the opportunity for members of the group to attend a potential 2024 controlled burn. There was a total of 9 attendees (4 Executive members/2 General members/3 guests) and the recording will be posted to TRCA's YouTube channel and the Youth Council webpage.

Sacred Medicines Workshop with Four Colours Drum Circle (October 2023)

Four Colours Drum Circle hosted the Youth Council Executive and a limited number of General members who had previously attended the Summer Retreat (July 15) for an outdoor educational workshop at the Heart Lake Conservation Park Medicine Wheel Garden. The workshop focused on Indigenous teachings around preparing and using sacred medicines and the tradition of smudging. Participants were able to take home a smudging kit which they created themselves, in order to use the smudge sticks and apply their learnings to their own lives. A total of 6 people attended (1 Executive member/2 General members/3 guests).



PHOTOS 7 AND 8: LEFT, CIDALIA, EARTH MEDICINE WOMAN, DEMONSTRATES SMUDGE STICK BUNDLING TECHNIQUES. RIGHT, PARTICIPANTS MAKE THEIR OWN SMUDGE STICKS

Urban Nature Biodiversity Workshop with University of Toronto (November 2023)

Youth Council Executive members were invited by the University of Toronto's Ecology & Evolutionary Biology Department to present and co-facilitate an in-person workshop on November 25, 2023. Three Executive members attended, and presented on the Youth Council, as well as participated in and facilitated guided discussions around urban biodiversity.

TRCA Youth Council Virtual Town Hall – Peel Transition (November 2023)

The Youth Council hosted Dr. Victoria Kramkowski, Senior Manager for TRCA's Government and Community Relations Team for a presentation on the expected Peel Transition of 2025 (Photo 9). Topics covered included learning about different types of municipalities and the services they provide, Bill 112 (*The Hazel McCallion Act*) and the dissolution of Peel, as well as issues that municipalities and conservation authorities may need to consider. There was a total of 11 attendees (5 Executive members/4 general members/2 guests) and the recording will be posted to TRCA's YouTube channel and Youth Council webpage.



PHOTO 9: DR VICTORIA KRAMKOWSKI PRESENTING ON PEEL TRANSITION

TRCA Youth Council Virtual Town Hall – Developing Your Environmental Career and Introduction to TRCA Seasonal Opportunities (January 2024)

The Youth Council hosted a career-focused town hall on January 31, 2024 with guest speakers from various TRCA divisions, including, Human Resources, Restoration & Infrastructure, Education & Training (STEP), and Conservation Parks and Lands. Topics covered included job search tips and tricks, insight into TRCA seasonal positions, STEP’s Source to Stream Conference, as well as personal stories of unique TRCA staff journeys and lessons learned along the way. There was a total of 25 attendees (8 Executive members/9 General members/8 staff) and the recording will be available on TRCA’s YouTube channel and the Youth Council webpage.

Virtual Tour of Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre (February 2024)

A virtual tour of the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre will be hosted by the TRCA Youth Council, in collaboration with the Canadian Conservation Corps, led by an Executive Member who is also a CCC participant. The tour will highlight OTCC’s Peterborough facility, highlighting the importance of turtle conservation. This event is presented in partnership with the Canadian Wildlife Federation, Canadian Conservation Corps, Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre, and TRCA’s Youth Council.

Objective: Create Fun Opportunities

TRCA Youth Council and Vaughan-Woodbridge Youth Council Stewardship Event (August 2023)

This event originated from a request from MP Sorbara’s Vaughan-Woodbridge Youth Council for a joint event with the TRCA Youth Council members. MP Sorbara and his staff, along with TRCA HR staff, came out for a morning of removing invasive buckthorn at William T. Foster Woods in Vaughan (Photo 10). TRCA Restoration staff provided safety guidelines, equipment, and educational support throughout the removal of approximately 100 buckthorn plants. This event was a great opportunity for the two youth councils to mingle and learn of shared concerns and goals. Plans were set in motion for the groups to meet again for a planting event during the fall planting season (see below). This event drew 9 participants (2 Executive members/5 General members/2 guests). It was a learning experience with respect to the timing of summer events; the future the Youth Council will attempt to schedule events away the last weeks of summer in order to increase attendance.



PHOTO 10: MP SORBARA AND GROUP FOLLOWING A SUCCESSFUL BUCKTHORN REMOVAL EVENT

Fall Friends Planting Event (October 2023)

A three-hour planting event was held at an active restoration site in Vaughan near Teston and Highway 400 in partnership with TRCA’s York Education Team and led by TRCA Restoration staff. Activities included a safety demonstration (Photo 11), followed by over 25 participants planting 300 trees in just under 1.5 hours (4 Executive members/21 General members and others) Following the planting, participants networked over fall-inspired refreshments and a guided art project painting rocks found on site. This event attracted several younger participants due to circulation of the event through one of our Executive member’s school Eco Club network. The event provided an opportunity for the younger participants to earn hours towards their mandatory high school volunteer hours quota, provided valuable planting experience to all, and was an opportunity for participants to learn about working together for a common goal. The sense of accomplishment from the group can be seen in the photo below (Photo 12).



PHOTO 11 AND 12: LEFT, PARTICIPANTS OBSERVING A SAFETY DEMONSTRATION PRIOR TO PLANTING. RIGHT, A GROUP OF ACCOMPLISHED PLANTERS FOLLOWING THE EVENT!

Fall Fungi Foray (October 2023)

Executive members had a keen interest in fungi this year. One Executive member organized the Fall Fungi Foray walk with the Mycological Society of Toronto (MST). MST provided an experienced guide for TRCA's group of 8 participants (2 Executive members/6 general members) for an hour long walk at Nashville Conservation Reserve. On the walk, participants were introduced to different types of fungi and their role in the environment (Photo 13). Fungi were also observed under a hand lens and MST provided a display of various fungi specimens.



PHOTO 13: PARTICIPANTS LEARNING ABOUT DIFFERENT TYPES OF FUNGI

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Structure

The structure of the Youth Council has seen some minor adjustment since the program's inception, namely the boomerang effect that Covid has played on the format for the delivery of events. Since 2019, we have gone from in-person, to fully virtual, and now back to a productive mix of the two formats. With our General membership numbers continuing to grow year after year, we now have a good age range on the Youth Council Executive, which enables better promotion of initiatives, from high school to young professional audiences. Allowing Executive members to stay on for a second term has helped to maintain institutional memory and facilitate more continuity for planned events during the transition time between terms. Logistically, the Youth Council Executive continues to meet monthly, but has seen increased informal communications between meetings. The 2023-2024 Youth Council Executive was structured such that assigned administrative roles throughout the year were set at the beginning of the term, allowing for everyone to have a chance to fill each role (Chair, Minutes, Land Acknowledgement, and Newsletter) and made for smooth delivery of monthly meetings and newsletter circulation. The TRCA Youth Council will continue to hold two seats on the Regional Watershed Alliance, which will continue to allow the Executive to learn more about TRCA's programs and services and to provide more youth perspective on TRCA strategic goals.

Goals and Objectives

Learn about what is important to youth

The entrance survey continues to provide the most robust data indicating the most important issues to youth. As seen in Figure 6 earlier, the most frequently selected topics from 2023-2023 were once again selected as the most popular, which continues to be reflective of the current social movements that have arisen from the pandemic, such as diversity, inclusion and Indigenous reconciliation. In response to these topics of interest, the Executive delivered several events in 2023 focused on Indigenous learning. The Youth Council will continue to collect this data to inform their, and TRCA's, programming.

Build youth network

The youth network continues to grow as more groups reach out to learn about, and partner with, the Youth Council. Hosting events in partnership with other groups is a great opportunity for network development. By extending our audience through partner networks, other groups can be reached that may not have been previously aware of TRCA. Use of LinkedIn and cross promotion of TRCA's education newsletters has also benefitted network growth. Providing a combination of in-person and online initiatives on a variety of topics draws in different audiences through flexibility of choices and accessibility.

Build capacity and engage youth with learning opportunities

Capacity building amongst the Youth Council Executive has been significant. Allowing a second term for interested and engaged Executive members has resulted in strong peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and mentorship, which has increased the overall capacity of the Youth Council Executive. The returning Executive members set expectations and norms that helped to ensure that the 2023-2024 Executive remained consistently engaged throughout their term. Furthermore, the mentorship and expectations set by the group helped to provide an atmosphere where new members were comfortable sharing ideas and taking the lead on new activities and initiatives.

The activities held by the Youth Council Executive were empowering not only for the participants, but also for the youth organizing the events. Opportunities to present to small and large audiences lead to growth in leadership and public speaking skills for Executive members. The Youth Council Executive also gained valuable experience organizing events of varying formats including: chairing monthly meetings, participating in panel discussions, starring in TRCA Watershed Plan videos, guest appearances on a local radio show (Toronto Nature Now), and representing and promoting the TRCA Youth Council at various events. Events that included Indigenous speakers and presenters also fostered deeper understanding of Indigenous history and culture and provided experience and capacity for the Youth Council to address issues of reconciliation in their future work.

The Youth Council Executive continues to benefit greatly in their academic and employment pursuits through the skills and experiences they gain as part of the program. This year, they have had multiple opportunities to meet formally and informally with staff from various TRCA divisions, opening their perspectives to the diversity of career opportunities at conservation authorities and in the wider environmental sector. There continues to be great opportunity to demonstrate interesting and unique work done by TRCA staff to the Youth Council through Town Halls. The upcoming Town Hall in January 2024 will include former TRCA seasonal staff that are now employed on a longer-term basis at TRCA, in order to showcase the employment possibilities in the environmental sector and at TRCA.

Create fun opportunities for youth

The Youth Council Executive has continued to pursue diverse fun opportunities for youth. Event themes included climate change, habitat conservation and stewardship, sustainable communities, and learning about Indigenous history and culture, in line with the interests of the general and Executive members. Fun opportunities increase the draw for more members of the public to join a single event and/or to sign up for the General membership list with the Youth Council.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the Youth Council continues to reach program goals of identifying youth perspectives, building a strong youth network, building capacity and engaging youth with learning opportunities, and creating fun opportunities for youth. The following is a summary of the recommendations for program improvement through the evaluation of meeting goals and objectives:

- Continue hybrid program delivery with online offerings for presentations and discussion forums, and in-person offerings for place-based or hands-on activities;
- Continue network building and marketing the TRCA Youth Council, tapping into other TRCA education and public-facing programs and TRCA connections with municipal partners;
- Continue strengthening the connections between the Executive and General members of the Youth Council through individual outreach to new General members and increased open Executive meetings or town halls;
- Building a communication platform to re-engage former Youth Council Executives to champion initiatives and attend events;
- Continue efforts to broaden the recruitment of the Youth Council to include more members from diverse communities through more deliberate recruitment strategies with different groups/agencies who work in target communities;
- Continue to find synergies between TRCA’s work and strategic goals/priorities, and the work of the Youth Council;
- Reassessing membership structure/management and ensuring “Express Consent” for use of member information is collected going forward to ensure ongoing communication and accurate membership numbers; and
- Increase opportunities for RWA members to be involved, either directly or through promotion of events, through quarterly updates at RWA meetings by RWA Youth Reps, or through other means.

CONCLUSION

The TRCA Youth Council seeks to engage youth aged 16-30 in TRCA’s jurisdiction. It is a program that is led by youth under the mentorship and guidance of TRCA staff. As evidenced above, the Youth Council hosted a combination of virtual and in-person events throughout the 2023/2024 term. Virtual events are preferred for information sharing and saving time and costs, while in-person events were intentional around place-based and hands-on activities. The events and initiatives of 2023 demonstrate the continued drive and passion of the 2023-2024 Youth Council Executive. While there are some recommendations for program improvement, the Executive has been able to progress towards the goals set out in the program framework. This term also saw a continued increase in the number of General membership sign-ups. Major strengths from the 2023-2024 term are the variety of Youth Council event programming offered and the increase in outreach efforts through marketing and presentations, which led to the increase in the number of General members. The program has also had a positive impact on the Executive members in developing their leadership and public speaking skills, as well as supporting their academic and professional pursuits. With these successes in mind there is always room to improve program delivery. Recommendations include the continuation of engagement of General members and former Executive members, broadening the network to include more recruitment with different groups and agencies who work with under-represented communities, and finding synergies between TRCA’s work and strategic goals that can better incorporate Youth Council perspectives.



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