

AIES 2025 Summit Report

Alliance for Indigenous
Environmental Stewardship
House of Awakened Culture

Suquamish Homelands
April 16–18, 2025



Overview

Building upon the foundation laid by the inaugural AIES Summit, the 2025 Alliance for Indigenous Environmental Stewardship (AIES) Summit brought together over 40 Native professionals working across the conservation field, along with a purposeful inclusion of non-Indigenous allies. As a growing network, AIES supports Indigenous staff navigating systems not built for them—creating space to build solidarity, strategize, and sustain careers in this work. This year's summit theme, **Paddling Together**, emphasized the power of collective movement: toward sovereignty, land justice, cultural revitalization, and mutual care.

Just as in AIES I, one of the most cherished aspects of this year's gathering was the time spent in outdoor, land-based activities—canoe paddling and plant walks that grounded the group in ancestral connection and place-based healing. Our canoe journey took place in traditional Suquamish canoes, offered as a private experience not available to the general public. Suquamish hosts generously shared teachings about respecting the canoe, paddles, and one another—along with paddling techniques, stories, and traditional songs that carried deep cultural meaning across the water.



Held on Suquamish lands, the gathering also included a barge tour of the surrounding waterways, where participants heard historical stories while viewing the very lands those stories took place upon—strengthening their understanding of place, history, and legacy. Shared meals featured traditional foods such as clams, oysters, salmon, and other coastal offerings, prepared with Indigenous cooking techniques that honored the relationships between people and place.

We honor the hospitality and leadership of the Suquamish Tribe—especially Chairman Leonard Forsman, who welcomed us to Suquamish lands, and Tribal Council Member Azure Boure, who led the traditional plant walk. The gathering was held in the recreated longhouse of Chief Seattle and near his grave, a location rich in spiritual resonance. Chief Seattle's prophetic words on the sanctity of the Earth echoed in our minds, reminding us that, "This we know: the Earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the Earth." Their stewardship and generosity anchored the gathering in place and spirit.

AIES SUMMIT 2025: What Brought Us Here

Welcome from Suquamish
Tribe – Chairman Forsman



What We Did



Reception & Community Grounding

Participants connected over a welcoming reception and campfire chat.



Opening Circle & Common Threads

Reflections on land, identity, and responsibility set the tone.

“

This isn't a job for me. It's my responsibility—my grandmother, my father—they taught me what it means to love the land.



Panels & Presentations

Including [Green 2.0's 2024 Transparency Report](#), which focused on increasing representation and equity for people of color in conservation, and NARF's Homelands Coalition strategy, which emphasized the alignment of Indigenous land, law, and leadership in climate efforts. Green 2.0's findings also informed discussions around the critical need to support the retention and advancement of Native professionals in the field. The Homelands Coalition presentation helped contextualize this within broader policy structures. These presentations were followed by a breakout session where participants reflected on advocacy challenges and shared strategies for cultivating Indigenous leadership.



Breakout Discussions

Topics included Indigenous retention, mentorship, and navigating organizational systems, with continued reflections tied back to themes raised in the earlier presentations.

“

*TEK is not a buzzword.
It's our science.
Our lived experience.*



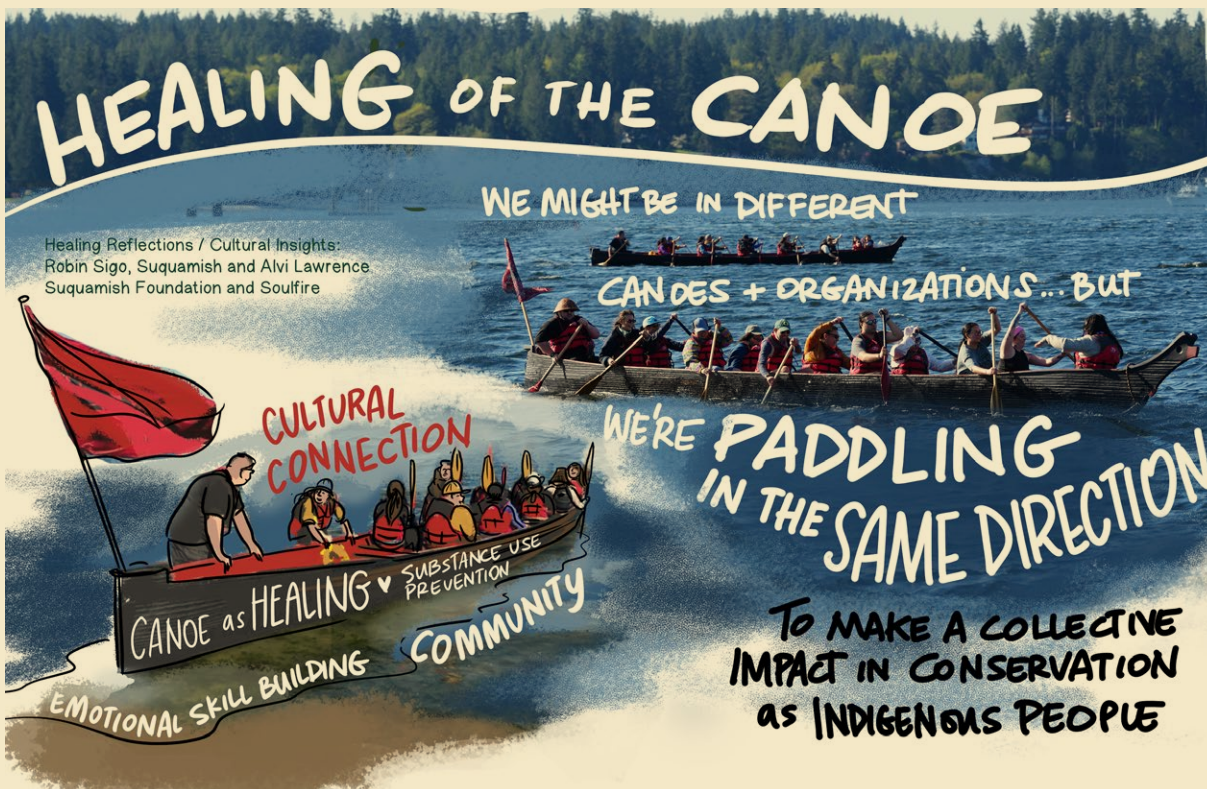
Healing Activities

The summit created space for healing as an essential and intentional part of leadership sustainability. Participants joined a traditional plant walk led by Healing of the Canoe, and experienced water-based healing practices in traditional Suquamish canoes—offered privately by the Tribe as a sacred experience. Suquamish hosts taught respectful paddle techniques and shared stories, songs, and teachings about honoring the canoe, the paddles, and each other.

These healing practices grounded participants in cultural belonging and self-remembrance. For many who carry the weight of burnout in systems not built for them, these moments offered rest, release, and renewal. AIES recognizes that cultural safety and personal restoration are not optional—they are foundational to long-term Indigenous leadership. [More info at healingofthecanoe.org](https://healingofthecanoe.org).

“

*Being in that canoe,
I remembered who I was
before the burnout.*



Story Mapping

Attendees shared connections to ancestral lands and movement work.

This year marked the first intentional inclusion of non-Indigenous allies, who were invited to witness, listen, and engage in mutual learning. Their presence enriched the dialogue by offering moments of reflection and accountability.

“

This space helped me realize how much I still have to unlearn and how powerful it is to simply show up in humility.

Key Themes

Connection to Land as Leadership

Participants described land as central to identity and legitimacy in their leadership. Calls were made to center TEK in institutional hiring and policy.

Retention through Relational Culture

Many attendees are the sole Native staff in their institutions. The summit emphasized that belonging requires cultural safety and deep peer networks, beyond numeric equity metrics. Insights from Green 2.0 reports on Native staff retention were echoed throughout discussions.

Canoe as Metaphor & Practice

The Healing of the Canoe program offered more than an activity; it served as a metaphor for collective protection. “Paddling together” came to signify solidarity across generations and organizations.

Strategic Power Building

Participants voiced a strong need for internal advocacy tools—how to speak truth to power and take up space in policy and philanthropic conversations. The Homelands Coalition presentation galvanized interest in deeper collaboration.



Youth Engagement as a Priority

Participants consistently raised the importance of Indigenous youth inclusion. While limited this year, the need for intergenerational knowledge transfer and youth leadership was widely affirmed. AIES is now exploring strategies for mentorship programs, youth-led sessions, and long-term engagement pathways.

Growing AIES Together

Attendees shared enthusiasm for formalizing AIES as a nonprofit with capacity for leadership development, policy work, and convenings. AIES is becoming a container for career-spanning support.



Who Was in the Circle

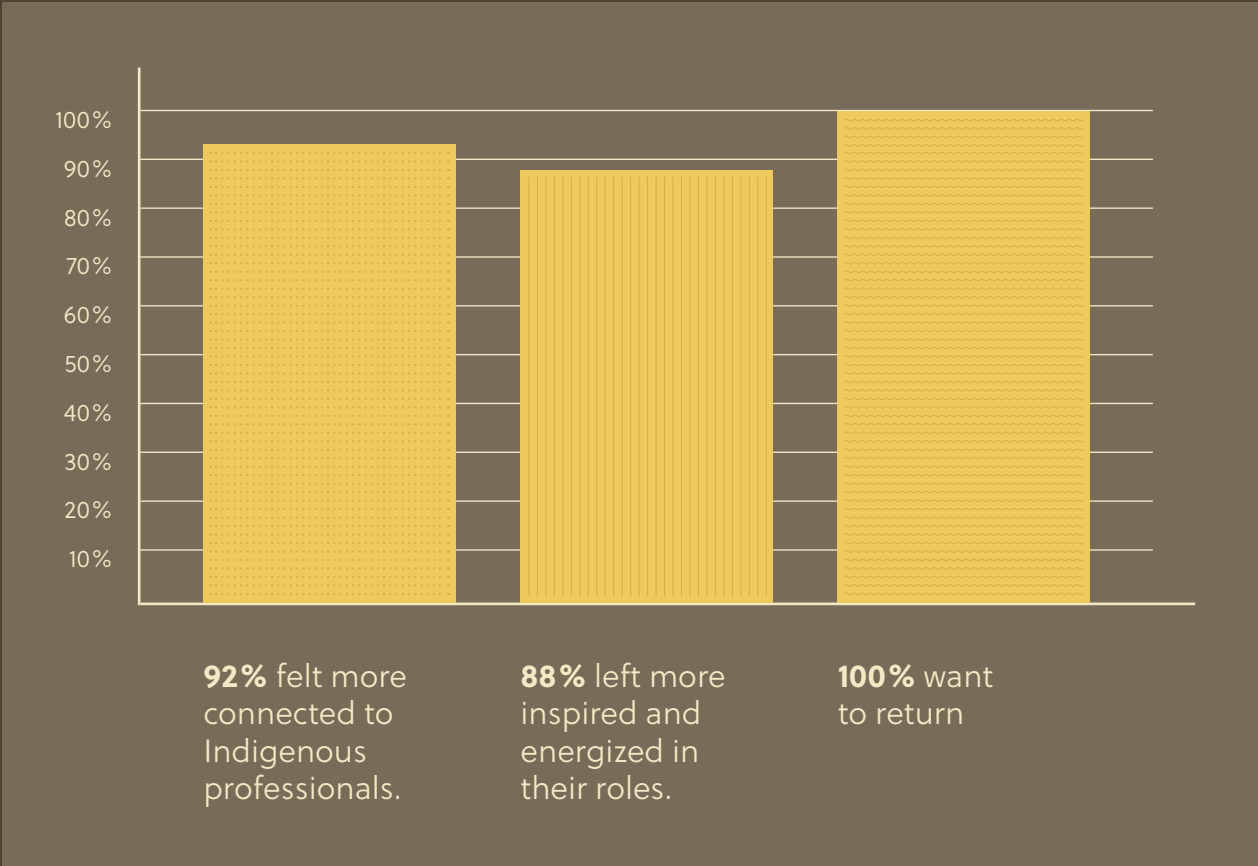
Participants represented a broad mix of organizations: Tribal Nations, grassroots initiatives, NGOs, and funders. Representation spanned regions across the Pacific Northwest, Southwest, Great Plains, Northeast Woodlands, and Southeastern Woodlands. The regional diversity affirmed the national relevance of AIES's work.

The Homelands Coalition session, led by the Native American Rights Fund (NARF), served as a catalyst for deepening cross-organizational strategy. The presentation shared a compelling vision for aligning land, law, and Indigenous leadership in the environmental movement, highlighting current gaps and future opportunities. Many participants cited this session as a turning point, sparking conversation about what a coordinated Indigenous policy front could look like.



Survey Reflections

26 Respondents



Top Highlights



HEALING OF THE CANOE



STORY MAPPING



RETENTION DISCUSSIONS

“

This healed something I didn’t know needed healing.

Culture and ceremony weren’t extras—they were core.

I hope this becomes a permanent space.

Additional Reflections

“ Seeing youth represented—even if just a few—was deeply powerful. It reminded me what this work is really for.

“ We need to prepare the next generation. Mentorship and inclusion of Indigenous youth must become a central priority, not an afterthought.

“ This space helped me imagine a future where my nieces and nephews won't feel so alone in this work.

Participants voiced a resounding call for deeper youth inclusion—both as contributors and future leaders. This thread ran through informal conversations and formal feedback, shaping one of the clearest mandates for AIES's evolution.

Impact & Outcomes

Stronger Peer Network

Cross-organization support groups formed.

Momentum for Advocacy

Homelands Coalition generated interest in policy collaboration.

Blueprint for AIES Growth

Readiness to formalize a nonprofit.

Recommitment to Youth

Emergent theme to prioritize youth as core to future gatherings.

Inspiration for Organizational Change

Participants left with renewed energy to push their organizations for change—from hiring practices to program design.



Why Fund This Work



This gathering catalyzed cross-sector solidarity, healing, and strategic alignment among Indigenous professionals who often navigate institutional isolation. More than just a retreat, it was a springboard for collective action, mentorship of Indigenous youth, and policy influence rooted in lived experience.



Participants departed with renewed clarity, confidence, and a shared roadmap to advance change. This momentum aligns with Green 2.0's calls for equity in the environmental movement—especially in ensuring Native professionals are not only retained but also empowered to lead.



Sustained investment means strengthening the AIES network, fostering the leadership trajectories of Indigenous conservationists, and achieving the systemic shifts Green 2.0 champions: a sector where Native leaders thrive, influence policy, and drive inclusive environmental stewardship.

Recommendations & Next Steps

Fund Future Gatherings:

These are essential interventions.

Invest in AIES:

Support its growth into a formal 501(c)(3).

Expand Youth Inclusion:

Prioritize youth engagement in all future summits.

Support Indigenous-led Facilitation:

Cited as a major contributor to safety and success.

Deepen Policy Work:

Include structured spaces for strategy and cross-sector planning.

Track & Share Data:

Use regional, organizational, and role-based info to improve outreach.

Closing Words

This year's summit was more than a gathering—it was a re-grounding. Participants paddled together not just in canoes but in a shared vision. AIES is rising as a home for Indigenous professionals building futures rooted in sovereignty, ceremony, and kinship.

A thriving Indigenous kinship to land and all relatives.



Connect With Us

We welcome your ideas, questions, and continued collaboration. To learn more, support the next summit, or connect around Indigenous-led conservation, please reach out directly to the AIES Summit Planning Committee:

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Additional Resources

[Link to Full participant list and bios](#)

[Link to Green 2.0 Report](#)

[Link to Acronyms Cheat Sheet](#)

[Link to Hit Me Up Contact Directory](#)

[Link to Resource Wall Contact Directory](#)

People Who Made This Possible

Special experiences within the community—and the care, planning, and connection they required—would not have been possible without the organizations that hosted us. We offer heartfelt thanks to the following individuals and teams who contributed their time, wisdom, hospitality, and leadership to the success of the summit:



Healing of the Canoe
Staff at Suquamish Clearwater Casino
Resort, Kiana Lodge, and House of
Awakened Culture
Kate Ahvakana
Azure Boure
Gabriel Cook
Chairman Leonard Forsman

Skylene George
Michelle Gin
Denita Holmes
Barbara Anne Lawrence
Albie and Nigel Lawrence
Heather Purser
Tyleeander Purser
Chuck Wagner

Organizing Partners

This work was made possible through the generous support of our funding partners. Their belief in Indigenous-led conservation, mentorship, and healing spaces is instrumental:

