

# Intentional Seasonal Recruitment

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## Trends in Diversity-Focused Conservation Recruitment Practices of Seasonal Staff

The Park Institute of America - 2023

*"I don't think folks realize how much effort goes into intentional recruitment. They just expect it to happen without putting the monetary resources in place to make it happen."*

- Federal agency hiring manager and former conservation intern



## Introduction

For many students and young professionals, seasonal employment has long been a reliable pathway to gain conservation experience that can open doors to full-time employment opportunities. For others, the prospect of working as seasonal staff in a historically white and male-dominated career field in frequently austere locations for marginal pay is unattractive, stressful, and offensive. Despite increased use of outreach and hiring initiatives focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles, conservation employers report that seasonal recruitment has become increasingly challenging, with many organizations regularly falling short of both their diversity goals and their overall staffing targets.

In collaboration with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and numerous industry partners, the Park Institute of America sought to examine this recruitment challenge by evaluating organizational efforts to attract a diverse candidate pool to seasonal positions and youth programming in the conservation field. The primary goals of this research were to identify organizations increasing diversity in youth conservation pathways and examine how are they doing so, to pinpoint existing barriers to expanding DEI initiatives, and to analyze gaps between these initiatives and long-term employment opportunities in conservation.

An Institute researcher conducted substantive interviews with hiring professionals, recruitment managers, and program coordinators, many with personal experience as former seasonal staff. Placing ATC at the nucleus of a network diagram, the researcher scheduled discussions with hiring authorities within organizations that routinely collaborate with ATC on seasonal programming. Collaborators have included conservation recruitment and placement organizations, federal resource management agencies, and partnered nonprofits. In particular, the Institute sought out women, queer-identifying folx, and people of color who had served in these hiring roles to understand their challenges, concerns, successes, and recommendations to improve the hiring process. 17 total interviews spanned over 23 hours, with each following a semi-structured format that encouraged interviewees to share their experiences and insight.

This report organizes the interviews' findings into three parts. The first section introduces the three main limitations to more inclusive seasonal recruitment. The second section outlines additional factors identified as aggravating – or being aggravated by – the primary challenges to seasonal workforce diversification. The final section presents a summary of recommendations for organizations and hiring personnel seeking more effective DEI-focused seasonal recruitment.

By leveraging these conclusions, the Park Institute of America will help conservation employers effectively design and implement outreach efforts that attract candidates who may be unaware of conservation opportunities and allow for youth in all their diversity to access the field with ease, confidence, and convenience.

## Interview Notes

While extensive in interview quantity, this report was largely limited to hiring authority input, not candidate feedback. It was extremely difficult contacting previous interns, youth, and current prospective students to request interviews. Hiring managers lacked current contact information and/or continued relationships with recent candidates, making it difficult to reach them and gain perspective on candidate experiences.

All quotations have been anonymized. Although this creates difficulty in pinpointing the individuals and organizations laying the groundwork of this project, doing so allowed for transparency and candidness in the interviews to enhance the quality of research.

# Challenges

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Upon analyzing the interview transcripts, clear trends emerged in organizational approaches to DEI-focused recruitment as well as industry-wide sentiments on fostering a diverse workforce. Across interviews with recruitment professionals in both private and public sectors of the conservation field, three themes stood out as the foremost challenges to inclusive seasonal recruitment.

## 1. Funding Limitations

*“The thing that shocked me the most was that there was just no financial system or support in place to make [DEI-focused recruitment] a reality.”*

The challenge of funding resonated across all interviews. Hiring managers confirmed that funding is the principal gateway of opportunity for organizations seeking to create identity-conscious recruitment initiatives or to expand current initiatives. Many noted how appropriate funding would allow for greater program offerings for youth in the form of increased relocation stipends, increased wages, mental health support, community structures like affinity circles, and sponsored site visits. Such funding for DEI-oriented recruitment and programming is, however, consistently lacking, an issue repeatedly attributed to a common perception among organizational leadership that corresponding financial support is unnecessary.

While the interviewees universally acknowledged an industry-wide desire to create a diverse conservation workforce, they emphasized that this desire has not produced a comparable funding backbone. They further highlighted the fierce competition for funding among environmental nonprofit and public sector employers. This competition for limited funds – often which are restricted to programmatic expenses with limited overhead allowance – reduces the capacity for organizations to provide the necessary administration to make intentional youth DEI recruitment a reality.

*“Funding for programming – whatever there may be – doesn't always necessarily match the funding needed also for administrative support on the back end.”*

## 2. Capacity Limitations

*“With greater capacity, we could do so much more...greater outreach within communities of color, invest more in the intern experience, make sure that they’re having the most positive experience possible, which then results in greater conversion rates, and so forth.”*

Alongside funding deficits, adequate capacity was noted as an equally prominent challenge to implementing effective recruitment practices for diverse youth. Administrators were often required to create or source the appropriate materials on diverse recruitment *alone*, with the expectation of additional follow-on support to handle seasonal and full-time hiring. After asking fellow colleagues of color for advice on how to improve their current recruitment practices while operating alone, many hiring managers received similar answers of “I don’t know; we’re all doing this alone.”

Since funding and compensation were so limited, it was often one person managing sourcing, marketing, communications, onboarding, and retention for all components of the recruitment process among volumes of candidates. Furthermore, there does not appear to be an existing template or plan for efficient onboarding and guided personnel management that does not also require a supporting team. Interviewees once again attributed this limitation to a lack of understanding among organizational leadership about the true depth and volume of work needed to create a diverse, inclusive, and equitable workforce.

In clarifying this point, several interviewees noted that inclusive hiring is far more intensive than traditional applicant screening as it involves:

- curating a candidate pool representing diverse demographic and educational backgrounds;
- creating a culturally responsive and conscious environment during all phases of screening, hiring, and employment; and
- managing an entire cohort’s histories, predispositions, and preferences; and
- providing encouragement, guidance, and informal mentorship.

*“I’ve nearly quit about three times. I’ve had my two-week notice sitting as an inbox draft for the last three months. It’s too much for just me to handle — I’m burnt out and I’m not sure how much longer I can chug at this alone.”*

In fact, many federal agencies and public sector organizations will contract placement firms to conduct all components of diverse youth recruitment for them since they do not have enough employees to do so themselves.

### 3. Limited Retention Metrics

*"I wish I could tell you that all of my interns stayed in this field. I've only kept in touch with two, but they're working in very different industries now."*

While a primary focus of youth conservation programs is diverse recruitment, equal attention to *retention* has not been given. Interviewees uniformly noted that there has been no systemized method to track retention of candidates in conservation after employment in a seasonal role. Many managers would maintain contact with a few interns or seasonal employees with whom they had built strong relationships, but this did not apply to the entire cohort they managed.

*"When I was an intern, I was told 'continuing support' was a pillar of our seasonal program. However, there was only one ranger responsible for sending jobs, reviewing resumes, etc. which made it extremely hard to receive timely and dedicated support in my 30-person cohort."*

Some programs would institute a singular follow-up after program completion, but those traditionally asked for internship feedback rather than gauging future plans in the conservation field. The primary form of monitoring retention was through informal communication methods like social media; even these interactions occurred on an irregular basis. Without visibility into the long-term retention of seasonal staff in the conservation field, it is extremely difficult to gauge the effectiveness of DEI recruitment initiatives and programming expressly intended to foster enduring workforce diversity.

Agencies like the U.S. Forest Service have begun implementing actions to address increased concerns over both low conversion rates and high turnover rates. The Forest Service Action Plan lays out a broad set of high-leverage actions with potential for creating systemic change that benefit their constituents and all marginalized communities they may access. This indicates a shift to prioritizing conversion and retention as the costs of high turnover are now being realized.

# Compounding Factors

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Although cited as the key limitations to more inclusive seasonal recruitment, the challenges of funding, capacity, and retention measurement were not the only concerns cited by hiring authorities. The interviewees noted that these challenges were often either compounded by existing barriers to inclusivity and diversity, or they themselves triggered a cascade of additional obstacles.

## 1. Hiring Status

*"We have to change our recruitment perspectives, generally, and try not just going with who's easiest to get in the door."*

While many federal or public sector employers contract inclusive placement organizations to outsource DEI recruitment, many candidates that were ultimately hired held Public Land Corps non-competitive hiring status. Since acquiring non-competitive status has traditionally required 640 hours of work, it places a strong barrier for applicants who are newly interested in exploring conservation or may have technical skills that are not directly applicable to conservation work. Overall, interviewees confirmed it is most beneficial for youth to receive non-competitive hiring status *prior* to applying for conservation positions to increase their probability of acceptance. However, managers admitted this is not easily attainable and limits the pool of diverse youth in a given candidate pool.

## 2. Position Advertisement

*"Word of mouth isn't necessarily going to go much further given, unfortunately, how segregated and insular our nation is."*

Due to a lack of funding and capacity support, the most common method of disseminating position announcements is through personal networks of the recruiter or existing partnerships of the organization. While many employers held recruitment events at minority-serving institutions and directed focus towards students with specific trades like computer science and engineers, the generally observed trend was for college students to seek positions in lucrative

industries rather than socially responsible fields. Hiring managers noted the most successful college recruitment occurred among final-year undergraduates who were just beginning to enter the workforce. Although social media outlets were also used successfully as recruitment channels (e.g., Facebook groups identifying as hikers of color, BIPOC conservationists, and queer environmentalists), those were traditionally closed groups that required invitation or application that recruiters were only able to access because of their own demographic background and/or personal contacts.

Job boards were often used, but interviewees noted they were not particularly fruitful platforms due to both limitations on position descriptions and lack of targeted outreach. Job board platforms often require organizations to disclose diversity metrics, established benefits, and forms of support provided for candidates. Organizations looking to expand workforce diversity are often doing so precisely because of existing racial and/or gender underrepresentation. So without accompanying details of new hiring reforms implemented to create a more inclusive environment, disclosing an underrepresentation of BIPOC employees can deter candidates from applying. Job boards were noted as being unable to capture the level of 'soft' support provided to candidates through affinity circles, manager checkpoints, or buddy systems, as those were not permitted in job boards' position description fields. Thus, the actual volume of support seasonal employees would be slated to receive would not be reflected in the position posting themselves.

The word-of-mouth method, however, only perpetuates diversity issues and may work against inclusive recruitment initiatives. This method introduces an access issue: those without existing connections in conservation will be unaware of the breadth of positions available. Additionally, people of color who experience negative outcomes in their seasonal roles will report that back to their networks. This dynamic further highlights the need for employers to be intentional about creating the communication and inclusive support infrastructure needed to produce positive experiences. The resulting feedback loop allows people of color to positively advertise these employment opportunities in their communities.

### 3. Pre-Screening

*"Without any type of connection or apprenticeship, these environmental organizations are not going to know how hardworking these members are."*

Limiting recruitment outreach only to known networks was cited as the largest pre-screening barrier as this method leads to unintentional filtering of prospective seasonal employees. Many qualified candidates would simply be unknowledgeable about the opportunities available to them because they belong to smaller networks and/or communities that have been traditionally



excluded from conservation hiring. Despite candidate self-exclusion, employers were taking more deliberate steps to broaden the candidate pool instead of imposing more screening steps in the process.

In collaboration with partner organizations, hiring managers would alter job descriptions to be more inclusive of diverse experiences. Interviewees corroborated the cyclical struggle of underrepresented minorities lacking engagement with conservation opportunities, thus leading to less work experience on their resumes and decreased likelihood of selection for a conservation position. Aware of this paradigm, recruiters worked to identify which experiences on candidates' resumes could best translate over to conservation/environmental positions to be as inclusive as possible. Examples of transferrable competencies included strong leadership, communications, and project management.

This inclusive approach to candidate screening was held in stark contrast to organizational screening, where interviewees noted that DEI metrics were rigorously evaluated when considering potential workforce collaborations with partner organizations, federal agencies, and national parks. Recruitment managers and placement programs would audit these groups for their DEI commitments, existing DEI initiatives, current diversity, and intentional action plans. These audits would include evaluating inclusivity priorities such as housing proximity for interns, transportation reimbursements, and nearby community services for diverse youth (e.g., multiethnic hair salons, cultural event centers, and close religious groups). Evidence of such planning considerations was used to gauge the intentionality of specific sites and perceived safety for seasonal interns.

## 4. Seasonal Preference

*“High turnover requires a higher investment in bringing in a new workforce, rather than creating a culture that encourages folks to stay for longer.”*

Most external conservation placement programs such as Greening Youth Foundation's Bridge Program or MobilizeGreen are uniquely tailored to recruit for seasonal and temporary roles. The annual turnover of the seasonal workforce far exceeds that of full-time employees, so recruitment managers that do receive supplemental programming support get assistance filling seasonal roles but not full-time hiring. Filling seasonal positions is proving evermore challenging since these roles provide fewer assured benefits (health insurance, technology reimbursements, retirement plan, etc.) than full-time positions and can offer unpopular placements for less than expected compensation. Since a primary goal of placement services and recruitment managers is to continually expand the conservation workforce, limited organizational capacity and

resources are funneled towards attracting seasonal candidates rather than similarly intentional recruiting for full-time positions.

## 5. Recruitment Approach

*“If I make one mistake, that might define an intern’s entire experience and cause them not to come back. I feel incapable of just being human — just making one mistake could cause the entire onboarding process and intern experience to fail. But I have no one to help me, so that’s my reality I guess.”*

In place of expansive assured benefits, placement programs and hiring managers would provide candidate support through promotional videos, development calls, and encouragement throughout the hiring process. Low and no-cost solutions such as virtual affinity circles, peer mentorship, and culturally inclusive toolkits were developed to supplement seasonal student and employee experiences. However, many recruitment managers of color voiced conflicted feelings on being wedged into a contradiction: advertising the position as rewarding and formative on the one hand while feeling compelled to candidly describe their own experiences facing discrimination in the field on the other. To navigate this feeling, recruitment managers would often frontload their realistic expectations for a seasonal role before discussing the position’s virtues. Although this approach minimizes the likelihood a seasonal employee has a tumultuous internship experience because of misaligned expectations, hiring managers noted that this method likely discourages many applicants and makes filling seasonal positions more challenging.

# Recommendations

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*"If I wasn't passionate about this, there would be nothing else compelling me to stay in this role in this field."*

Ultimately, the most necessary and immediate steps conservation employers can take to increase seasonal workforce diversity are to expand recruitment funding and hire additional staff. With more financial resources, program managers can broaden their outreach initiatives and fund inclusive recruitment approaches. Additional staff could then reinforce candidate engagement, onboarding, and post-seasonal retention support. These and other recommendations listed below represent a combination of direct suggestions from interviewees as well as interviewees' affirmation of the author's suggested proposals.

## Funding

1. Research and model expenditures needed to implement DEI-focused hiring initiatives based on current inflation rates, cost of living adjustments, and previous programming budgets. Allocate hiring program funds accordingly.
2. Appeal to existing program sponsors for donor referrals potentially interested in funding DEI-focused hiring capacity.

## Capacity

1. Create additional engagement positions to support recruitment managers. Look first to convert seasonal staff and rigorously pilot new hiring initiatives.
2. Conduct internal audit assessing racial diversity including interviews with former BIPOC employees to understand which initiatives and retention methods may have worked and which may not have worked during their employment.
3. Establish recruitment targets: annual and semi-annual goals to reach a benchmark percentage of non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-cisgender employees.
4. Integrate holistic upskilling (e.g. technical training, communication workshops, and team building exercises) into the organization's onboarding process to equalize any skill gaps that may exist among new hires.

5. Conduct local market research by surveying members of established, community-oriented social media groups about recommendations for improvements, ideas, or concern for an upcoming program. For example, ask if members of a local Outdoor Afro community are willing to participate in a brief compensated survey to gauge their reactions to a program, application, or position description prior to implementation or release.
6. Form institutional processes that hold managers and external recruiters accountable for fair and inclusive hiring practices through a conservation industry-specific standards for recruitment. Mandate organizational disclosure of hiring metrics.

## Applicant Support

1. Provide complete, clear, and accessible application information for candidates through office hours, translated application literature, and direct support lines for inquiries.
2. Include only absolutely necessary requirements in job descriptions to prevent applicants from self-excluding based on the fear of not meeting every piece of criteria. Exclude “preferred qualifications” in position descriptions and applications.
3. Rather than specifically asking candidates to tokenize their experiences with an explicit diversity question, utilize DEI concepts within each component of the hiring process. For example, ask how a candidate’s leadership style instills the representation of marginalized voices, the value of culturally responsive practices, and democratized opportunity.
4. Formulate a consistent follow-up system through post-internship mentorship calls, opportunity newsletters, referrals, and resume reviews. Advertise financial support for applicants needing to offset application fees.

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The testimonials, analysis, and recommendations in this report are meant to serve as a reference for organizational leadership, philanthropic funders, and placement program managers. The report illustrates an urgent need for seasonal conservation employers to establish capacity-building initiatives, expand funding for inclusive hiring, and measure retention and conversion rates among their workforce. The Park Institute of America hopes this research will inform the ability of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, and the overall conservation sector, to retain and attract an even greater pool of talented, qualified, and historically excluded conservation candidates.

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## About the Institute

The Park Institute of America is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that connects communities, organizations, researchers, and park leaders so that parks can provide the most value to people and the planet. By leveraging our network of park practitioners, conservation scholars, and cross-sector stakeholders, we show how every community benefits when parks are supported. We show *why parks matter*.

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