Ironwood Tree Experience

Spring 2026 Program Report

Youth for Blue Skies



PIMA COUNTY
ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

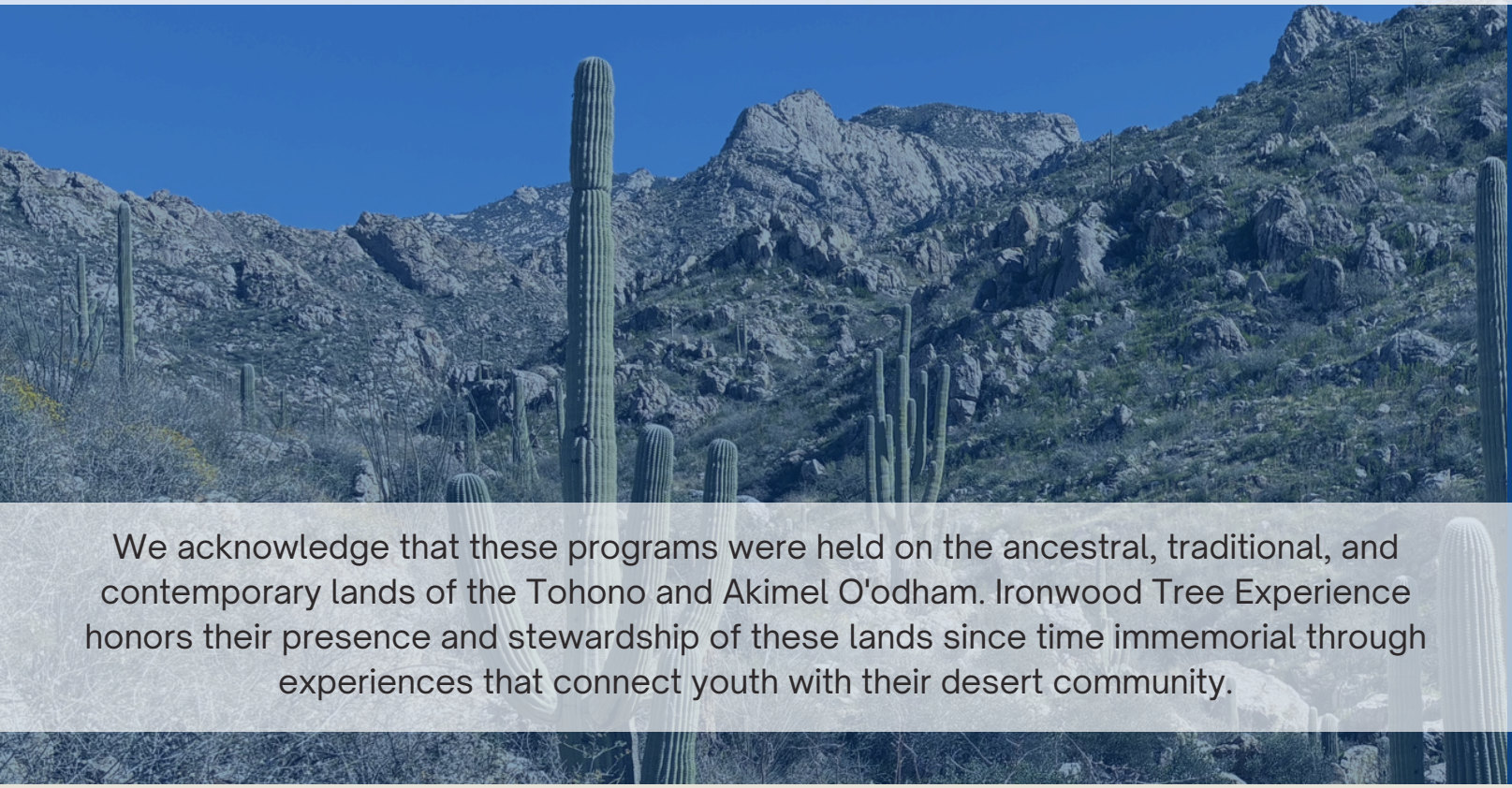
Clean Air Program
Pima County Environmental Quality

OVERVIEW

Youth for Blue Skies (YBS) is an **environmental and community-based internship program** in partnership with the **Pima County Department of Environmental Quality** (PDEQ). The 2026 cohort included 11 youth interns in grades 10-12 from 6 different schools in Pima County.

Across 9 sessions, interns settled into a **deeper understanding of air quality and environmental justice** through a foundation of **direct observation** in nature. These sessions combined classroom-style **lessons on air quality** and experiential **activities with community leaders** to learn about the interrelationships between water and air, localized water harvesting and our local cultural history.

Throughout the program, youth reflected on and recorded their experiences and observations. Interns distilled and translated this information into 7-10 minute long presentations, which they delivered to members of the public at the **Collaborative Research in Action Symposium (CRiA) on May 2, 2026**. In doing so, they called the audience to action in **enacting their hopes for a more environmentally just future**.



We acknowledge that these programs were held on the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of the Tohono and Akimel O'odham. Ironwood Tree Experience honors their presence and stewardship of these lands since time immemorial through experiences that connect youth with their desert community.

YBS IN REVIEW



YBS IN NUMBERS

46 applicants

11 student interns

6 different high schools

9 educational sessions

87 hours of programming

$400 stipends awarded per student

$4,300* distributed total

10 community partners

6 community organizations

**Funds were deducted from students who missed more than 7 hours of programming*

Image (left): Recruitment poster for the YBS spring 2026 season posted in high schools around Tucson and Sunnyside Unified School Districts.

OUR PARTNERS

Pima County Department of Environmental Quality
Natalie Shepp, Arisia Lee, Sky Siegel, Karen Wilhelmsen, Trini Alvares

Living Streets Alliance
Kate Saunders

Collaborative Research in Action Symposium
Dra. Jessica Bernal-Mejia, Corina Ontiveros

Tucson Clean and Beautiful
Angel Breault

The Santa Cruz River Heritage Project
Scully Young

Dunbar Springs Neighborhood Association
Brad Lancaster



Image (above): Natalie Shepp from PDEQ with ITE Youth after leading an activity on the Central Arizona Project at Gate's Pass.

MEET THE STAFF of ITE

Suzy - Executive Director & Co-Founder





Eric - Program Director & Co-Founder

Deborah - Associate Director



Olivia - Executive Coordinator



Benji - Program Coordinator





Miranda - Engagement Coordintaor

Isaac - Lead Instructor





Taylor - Program Coordinator

YBS PROGRAM CALENDAR



February

Wed. 2/4: Orientation
Sat. 2/7: Sabino Canyon Exploration
Sat. 2/21: Air Quality Site Visit
Thurs-Sat 2/26-2/28: Campout!

March

Sat. 3/7: Water Field Day
Sat. 3/14: Santa Cruz River Heritage Project & World Water Day

April

Sun. 4/12: Cyclovia
Sat. 4/18: CRiA Prep & Earth Day
Sat. 4/25: CriA Prep

May

Sat. 5/2: CRiA Symposium & Celebration!









Image 1: Quin and Mattie doing a Colorado River poetry reflection | **Image 2**: Chloe and Mariafernanda enjoying time at the campout | **Image 3**: Quetzal with a native snail at the Santa Cruz River Heritage Project | **Image 4:** Alondra and Isaac with guest interpreter from Catalina State Park

YBS PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS



PDEQ's Trini Alvarez showing students an AQ Monitor

Feb 21: On this day, our YBS cohort received a detailed tour of one of Pima County's **air quality monitoring sites** by **PDEQ's Trini Alvarez**. Interns applied concepts learned in lessons by **PDEQ's Natalie Shepp and Arisia Lee** to the physical technology that allows us to **detect air pollutants** and uphold the **Clean Air Act**. We ended with a lesson on **Environmental Justice and community action.**

Feb 26-28: No ITE internship is complete without a campout! This YBS cohort headed to **Catalina State Park** for a **3-day, 2-night campout** to build outdoors skills, practice leave-no-trace principles and **connect more deeply with both each other and the land**. Students received a live reptile and natural history demo from the Park, a lesson on dust pollution from **PDEQ's Karen Wilhelmsen** and deepened bonds through a **day hike** to a nearby waterfall and **swimming hole**.



Students & Benji at swimming hole at Catalina State Park



Students birdwatching at Sweetwater Wetlands

Mar 7: This day was all about the **flow of water**. We visited Gate's Pass to learn about the **Central Arizona Project** and reflected on our **interconnection with the distant Colorado River** through both a lesson from **Natalie Shepp** and a poem. We explored the **Sweetwater Wetlands** to learn about **birds and water reclamation** and ended the day with **Brad Lancaster** to learn about Dunbar Spring's localized rainwater revolution.

YBS PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS cont'd.



Students engaged in a bio-blitz at the Santa Cruz River Heritage Project

Mar 14: Building on our water exploration, we started the day learning about **river restoration at The Santa Cruz River Heritage Project**. We jumped into the river with **Scully Young from the Heritage Project** for a reflective morning **bio-blitz**. We then joined the **Santa Cruz River Days of Connection** alongside **Tucson Clean and Beautiful's Angel Breault** and **PDEQ's Sky Siegel** to learn more about local **community organizations protecting the Santa Cruz River.**

April 6: Engaging in community action, interns and staff volunteered at **Living Streets Alliance's Cyclovia**. Interns spent the morning volunteering as census takers, talking face-to-face with **community members** to learn **new perspectives on transportation**. Students reflected on their ideal modes of transportation and **what it would take to create a world where they got around more sustainably.**





Eric facilitating a workshop on "Presentations 101"

Apr 18 & 25: Students took two sessions to refine their **CRiA projects** through **guided trainings in mind mapping, conducting quality research, presentation development and public speaking**. ITE staff and PDEQ's **Arisia Lee** supported students through 1:1 guidance, and personalized feedback to finish drafts of their presentations for the **upcoming CRiA Symposium**.

May 2nd - CRiA SYMPOSIUM

CRiA Collaborative Research in Action



Students presenting their project at the CRiA symposium

Our season culminated in four youth-researched 7-10 minute long presentations delivered to the public at the **Collaborative Research in Action (CRiA) Symposium on Saturday, May 2nd**, hosted at the University of Arizona by Tucson Unified School District's (TUSD) Department of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Instruction.

Students were supported in building out research summaries or **abstracts** to propose their research ideas, brainstorming and sharing research questions with experts in relevant fields. Instructors lead **workshops on mind-mapping, public speaking, quality research, and presentation design** among others to prepare and train students for this and future opportunities in both public speaking and research.


Students with their CRiA diplomas after giving their presentation

CRiA PROJECTS

Air Pollution and its Impacts on A-Mountain



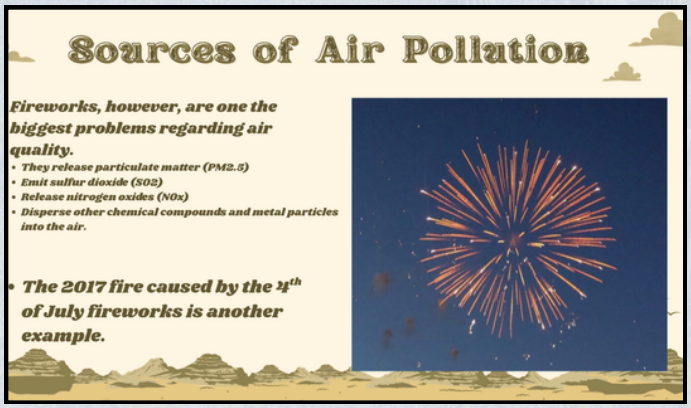
Quinlan McCormick
Tucson High



Mattie Leonard
City High School



Alondra Soto-Huerta
Tucson High



Key Points

- **"A" Mountain** is a key cultural touchstone for Tucson
- Air/sound **pollution** from July 4th fireworks harm people, plants and animals
- **Solutions** include drone and light shows instead of fireworks

We the People of South Tucson Demand Clean Air



Marcel Aza
Tucson High School



Juliana Gonzales
Pueblo High School



Mariafernanda Romero
San Miguel High School



Key Points

- South side of Tucson has a disproportionate amount of **industrial sites**
- Many people are unaware of health and safety **resources**
- **Survey** shows immense interest from the affected communities

CRiA PROJECTS

Impacts of Anthropogenic Particulate Matter (PM10) on Native Sonoran Wildlife







Sienna Whittier
Tucson High

Pasithea Warden-Brandt
City High School

Helena Chavez
Tucson High



Key Points

- ATVs cause detrimental dust **pollution** along dirt roads
- Prickly pears and bobcats experience **adverse health effects** from PM10 (dust)
- More **regulation** and **enforcement** are necessary for our environment

Design: A Biomimicry Approach





Chloe Lalama
Marana High School

Eden "Quetzalhuitzili" Enriquez-Cornejo
City High School



Key Points

- **Biomimicry** designs products which both mirror and return to nature
- This design principle is most relevant to **construction**, bio-plastics, and recycled waste
- A new world is possible!

STUDENT TESTIMONIALS



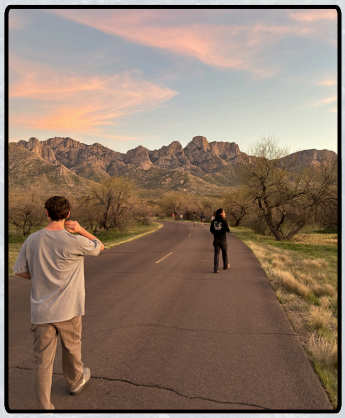
Has this internship impacted your next steps or future in any way? If so, how?

"This internship has really pushed me into definitely wanting to **pursue an education regarding the environment** and take classes so that I can further my education. I also want to take another internship of similar structure"

How has this internship impacted your day to day life?

"Having a **stronger connection with the Sonoran desert, and the people in the community**. I feel more knowledgeable in the air quality in South Tucson where **I could even educate others."**

"Whenever I see that the horizon looks a bit muggy in the morning **I make sure to check the Air Now app** to see if it is safe for me to spend too much time outside."





What words of wisdom would you give to future YBS interns?

"This experience is a **once in a lifetime kind of situation**. You are here now, so make the absolute most of it. Sometimes it may seem daunting and you might miss your free Saturdays, but if you keep an open mind and heart **you will learn so much and make some amazing friends along the way."**

Our **mission** is to inspire youth to connect with their community through experiences in nature.

From all of us at Ironwood Tree Experience, **thank you for making this program possible!**



YBS interns & staff during their 3-day, 2-night campout at Catalina State Park