



WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

Guided Field Learning to Deception Pass to Investigate Sea Level Rise



WSU Climate Stewards Certificate Program 2025

Issue

Washington communities are already experiencing the accelerating impacts of climate change—warmer temperatures, prolonged wildfire smoke, shifting precipitation patterns, reduced snowpack, and sea level rise. These changes threaten public health, agricultural productivity, forest resilience, infrastructure stability, water security, and community wellbeing. Many communities face disproportionate impacts due to existing social and economic vulnerabilities.

Despite growing awareness, many residents feel overwhelmed or uncertain about how to translate concern into meaningful local action. Local governments and nonprofit groups are seeking informed, trusted community members who understand climate science and can help neighbors engage in constructive, solutions-focused dialogue.

Misinformation and polarized public discourse make climate conversations difficult—particularly in resource dependent communities. There is a critical need for research-based, nonpartisan education that connects global climate science to Washington-specific systems and solutions. This information is particularly needed in the most populous counties including Spokane, Benton, Franklin, Clark, Thurston, Pierce, King, Kitsap, Snohomish, Skagit, and Whatcom.

Response

A climate stewards pilot program was launched in 2025 in Island and Skagit counties. The WSU Climate Stewards Certificate program provides a structured, research-based pathway for adult learners to become informed, confident, and effective local climate leaders. Through a ten-session hybrid format—combining online instruction, guided field experience, and applied stewardship projects—participants learned the scientific literacy and civic engagement skills needed to translate climate knowledge into community action.

The curriculum, developed and delivered by Washington-based scientists and extension educators, connects global climate science to Washington-specific systems and decision-making contexts. Participants gained a working understanding of state climate modeling, regional ecosystem impacts, and practical, place-based solutions in agriculture, forestry, energy, and water—sectors central to Washington's economy and resilience.

Beyond scientific content, the course intentionally builds leadership capacity. Participants developed skills in climate communication, social-emotional resilience, and strategies for addressing the disproportionate impacts of climate change. Graduates are prepared to facilitate constructive, solutions-focused conversations that are hopeful, inclusive, and culturally responsive—particularly in communities where climate dialogue may be polarized or complex.

By the numbers

Course Format. Ten sessions combining virtual classes, on-line curriculum, in-person field learning, and stewardship project presentations

Participation Data

- **64%** completion rate
- **23** enrolled participants
- **14** participants completed course components and earned certificate

Knowledge Gains

- **60%** increase in trauma-informed knowledge
- **48%** increase in understanding of eco-anxiety around climate
- **45%** increase in climate solutions knowledge

Climate Action 3-month post survey:

- **57%** of participants engage in advocacy or education of others about climate change
- **43%** of participants describe individual action such as reducing food waste and adjust home energy use

Response to Weather Events

- **85%** of participants reported Climate Stewards course helped them feel more confident in their ability to cope with or respond to extreme weather events in their community

Community of Practice

- **100%** of participants indicated interest in continued engagement and networking opportunity

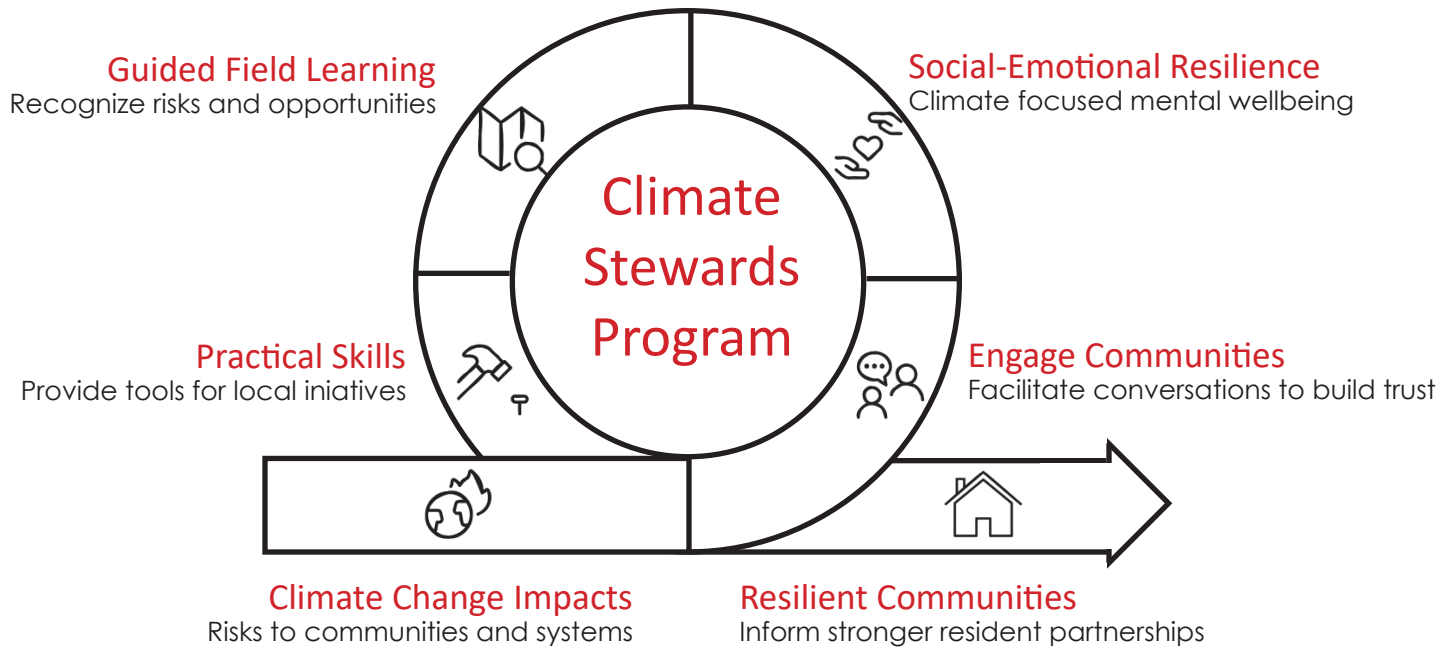


Guided Field Learning to the Mount Vernon Public Library to Investigate Green Building



Guided Field Learning to Monroe to Investigate Hydroelectric Power

Building Climate Resilience in Washington



Impact

The Climate Stewards Certificate Program strengthens both scientific literacy and social-emotional resilience, preparing participants to engage in informed, community-centered climate action. By training residents from across Washington, the program builds a growing statewide network of informed climate leaders. Graduates gain confidence discussing climate change, apply effective communication strategies, collaborate with local organizations, like Padilla Bay Estuary, and develop personal action plans in response to the climate crisis in their community and beyond. Through stewardship projects and field-based learning, such as exploring sea level rise, hydro-power facilities, and touring high-performance green buildings, participants identify local climate risks and actionable solutions. Emphasis on social-emotional resilience and addressing the disproportionate impacts of climate change ensures that graduates consider who is most impacted and how to design responses that are equitable and community driven. Training in trauma-informed communication deepens understanding of climate anxiety and disaster impacts, fostering empathy and shared purpose.

Public Value Statement

Through education and engagement with community members, the program expands the reach of university research, strengthens local partnerships, and generates measurable public benefits including improved environmental stewardship, increased community preparedness, and locally driven climate solutions resulting in a resilient Washington.

Contact Information

<https://climatestewards.extension.wsu.edu/>

Sarah Bergquest, MS
sarah.bergquest@wsu.edu
WSU Island County - 360-639-6062

Patricia Townsend, PhD
patricia.townsend@wsu.edu
WSU Extension – 425-357-6020

Diane Smith, RD, MA
diane.smith@wsu.edu
WSU Skagit County - 360-395-2355