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# Lessons & Landscapes: Lived Experience in the Outdoors

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# **Lessons & Landscapes: Lived Experience in the Outdoors**

Rachael Grasso, Western Washington University

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## **Abstract**

*This personal narrative documents Rachael Grasso's lived experience in the outdoors, focusing on mental health and female leadership. Originally written for a graduate capstone presentation, the narrative visits landscapes that Rachael associates with life lessons and pivotal moments in her career and personal life. She hopes to incorporate these experiences into her future work as an educator and outdoor instructor.*

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**Keywords: : mental health, leadership, women, landscapes, outdoors**



Figure 1: Photo of Dolly Sods by Rachael Grasso

Thank you for stumbling upon my graduate school capstone essay. This writing is a testament of my lived experience as a woman in the outdoors in relation to mental health and physical wellbeing. Too often in today's science, politics and daily life are lived experiences disregarded or ignored. At first, I shied away from this approach to my capstone. Shouldn't I fill the pages with a shocking revelation of the field or an eloquent point I'm trying to prove rather than ramble on about myself and my life? But throughout this graduate program, I have been encouraged to do a lot of self-reflection. Often we are asked, "Why are you here?" "Why are you doing this work?" I hope this capstone will bring to light the power of sharing one's personal story. I understand that my story comes from a place of privilege - I am a white cisgendered woman from a middle class family. I recognize that every single person reading this essay has a different story and lived experience. As an educator and lifelong learner, this is a humbling reminder of the broad scope of hidden stories that every student carries with them wherever they go. I recognize these diverse backgrounds in my audience and am grateful for you all being here with an open mind and heart, to read with curiosity and acceptance, leaving judgment behind.

Thinking back on this graduate program and my life as a student and educator, place has always been emphasized. Have you ever had a song come on the radio and immediately you are taken back to a time and place with a memory attached to the song? I experience this feeling with landscapes, too. I can think back to a landscape and remember a lesson I've learned in that space. I am going to guide you on a cross country journey visiting my favorite landscapes (thus far) and share with you the lessons I've learned about myself and the world that inspired me to be writing these thoughts down here for all of you to read. Don't worry, we aren't going to revisit all twenty-some years of my life and all of the places I've been. It would be impossible to speak to every experience that has helped shape my character - so what follows are the relevant milestones. Sit back, relax and buckle up...

Before we begin this journey together, first and foremost, I want to acknowledge that the land I am occupying today as I sit and write this is the traditional territories of the Upper Skagit, Sauk Suiattle, Nlaka'pamux, Swinomish and Nooksack and others that have been living here Since Time Immemorial.

Additionally, the following places I will mention in this essay are also traditional territories that were stolen from Indigenous communities during the colonization of the United States. As we move across the landscapes, I will acknowledge the names of a few of the peoples that traditionally inhabited and continue to inhabit the areas. While the concepts of wilderness and public lands without mention of these peoples is problematic, just this simple acknowledgement is also not enough when thinking about sovereignty, human rights, culture and legacy. It is a start in looking to the future of how to move forward for reconciliation.



*Figure 2: Photo of False Cape/Outer Banks by Rachael Grasso*

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### **Outer Banks, North Carolina: Traditional territory of the Hatteras, the Chowanoke and others**

The Outer Banks hold a bittersweet place in my heart and memory. My mom, Alice, absolutely loves the beach. If she could choose to have shells or beach themed anything, she would do it. Each year, my family and our extended family (from both my mother's Lekon side and my father's Grasso side, traveled to the Outer Banks. My earliest memories of nature are from this landscape. I remember chasing crabs, seeing jellyfish and dolphins for the first time, getting a massive splinter in my foot from the wood deck, losing glasses in the ocean, big thunderstorms and being afraid of the loud crashing ocean waves.

Along with these happy memories come the end of an era or perhaps a loss of innocence. In 1994, shortly after returning home from the Outer Banks and celebrating my sister, Jessica's, seventh birthday and our upcoming first days of first grade and



preschool, my father, Leonard C. Grasso, was a passenger on a fatal commercial airline flight. He bumped up his flight from Chicago to Pittsburgh to get home to his family sooner, unaware that US Air Flight 427 would never arrive at the Pittsburgh International Airport, instead crashing nose first into a rural Pennsylvania hillside just a few miles away. Needless to say, this tragedy changed my life and my family's lives forever. Even though I was only four years old at the time, I have vivid memories of the night he never returned home. My mother, strong and resilient, had no choice but to continue on and set an example for Jessica and me. Her actions as a widowed single mom influenced me to become who I am today. She was and still is selfless and determined. She joined other families of the airline disaster and worked her ass off to ensure that another plane would not crash due to similar rudder malfunctions.

My immediate family never returned to the Outer Banks after my father's death. The Lekons and the Grassos continued to create traditions each summer, but it seemed understandably too difficult for us. The Outer Banks will forever remain a landscape to remind me of simpler, more peaceful times in a life before a tragic loss.



*Figure 3: Photo of Pittsburgh skyline by Rachael Grasso*

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### **Suburbia, Pennsylvania: Traditional territory of the Iroquois, the Osage and others**

I have spent years exploring Pennsylvania and its young deciduous forests with rolling hills, brown rivers and four distinct seasons. Growing up, I frequented municipal parks, swimming pools, and backyards with my mom and sister – Mom would ask us where we wanted to go for the day and we had the opportunity to choose our playground. My first hike, bike and camping trip all took place in the Greater Pittsburgh Area. The only mountain I knew was Mount Washington – the one downtown Pittsburgh with incline cars traveling up and down its side, not the actual fierce and weathery mountain in New Hampshire with the same name. I spent countless hours staring out at the night sky through the car window as we drove across town at night. I learned how to ski at a county park and tried almost every sport offered in the community. My grandparents introduced me to birding through a window overlooking the backyard and left me keeping my eyes peeled for woodpeckers and songbirds. I attended an all girls school for a few years, giving me the opportunity to explore science and take interest in

the local environment. My friends and I chose to spend a week at summer camp, hiking and playing outside all day. This landscape taught me that beauty and adventure exist everywhere.

Ironically, I spent my teenage years in these same municipal parks and suburban wooded areas. One of my best friends in middle school and high school, Angie, lived across the street from Ferndale Park, the park with the really big metal slide built into the hillside. I remember as a kid putting wax paper down to slide even faster. I remember pooping in the squatty potty my mom kept in her trunk – perhaps one of my first poops outside. I probably played with Angie, as a child without knowing it. By the time we got into high school and became friends, they removed the metal slide from the park. It was during these tumultuous teenage years, when I began to struggle on a personal level. Emotions, pressure in school and feeling a lack of control in my life gave way to depression, anxiety, disordered eating and drug and alcohol use. Instead of playing in these parks and traveling to imaginary places, I hung out with friends drinking beer and smoking weed. Despite this deviant behavior, I appreciated being outside in all weather, looking for birds and watching the clouds roll by regardless of my state of mind. These places were a constant in my life. Modern therapy and mental health treatments did not appeal to me. I didn't personally gain anything from sitting in a room talking to a stranger about my thoughts and behaviors. I was turned off from these experiences, but kept participating and tricking the system until I was discharged. Perhaps I was reluctant to open up how I really felt or to explore the root cause of my inner turmoil. I wasn't interested in taking medication or living my life any differently.



*Figure 4: Photo of kayaks in Blackstone Bay by Rachael Grasso*

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### **Blackstone Bay, Alaska: Traditional territory of the Aleut, the Alutiiq and the Tanaina and others**

At eighteen, on a whim, I enrolled in college at small private university in Anchorage, Alaska. An adventure was just the thing I needed to get my life together, I thought. If I change the scenery and the landscape, surely I would adapt and change myself, too. So, I boarded a plane, shipped a few boxes of belongings and embarked on a new adventure to Alaska. My first few days were spent preparing for a sea kayaking trip, an optional freshman orientation expedition that seemed too good to pass up. As an outdoor professional now, I look back on myself on the first day of this trip and can't help but laugh. I was "that" participant. I had never been in the backcountry, let alone in a kayak or on any human-powered self-sustaining trip. I was paired up with a stronger guy to paddle in a purple tandem kayak. I couldn't stuff my extra long sleeping bag into my dry bag for the life of me and each day had a different person help me out. My tentmate snapped one of our poles on the first night, leaving us with a deformed but still functioning shelter. Despite having a nasty cough and cold before and during the trip, I snuck off multiple times a day at camp to smoke cigarettes. My body, not accustomed to physical activity, reacted in swelling from my shoulders down my arms, resulting in

what I called “balloon hands.” Furthermore, I had hardly eaten anything substantial in the previous two years and the thought of eating (and keeping) shared meals as a large group terrified me and my digestive tract. But, through all of these experiences, I fell in love with the backcountry, the mountains and a slower pace of life. This trip gave me the opportunity to live in a small group, to touch glaciers and to experience uncertainty. Although it seemed as if all my worries were gone, once I returned to the small campus and life on my own for the first time, reality hit. As the daylight became increasingly absent, I learned in Alaska that no matter where I traveled to or how far away I went from home, I could never create distance from myself. I left Alaska and the potential for adventure because my body and my mind were nowhere near sound enough to safely live in the mountains.





*Figure 5: Photo of Lone Mountain by Rachael Grasso*

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### **Moonlight Basin, Montana: Traditional territory of the Cheyenne, the Flathead, the Shoshone and others**

About a year after my time in Alaska, I was living in Pittsburgh and had recently met my husband, Brian. We found each other at the farthest from an all-star moment in my life. I was doing poorly in college and lacked motivation for myself and my health, taking unnecessary risks and not really giving a fuck. Two months after we met, Brian and I decided on a whim to visit one of his friends in Montana who was working at Moonlight Basin a ski resort opposite from Big Sky on Lone Mountain. So, we embarked on a ski trip – even though I hadn’t skied since that time in the county park and I wasn’t feeding myself or in any type of physical fitness. In Montana, I experienced my first powder day. I skied real mountains, despite yard sale-ing (a term used after wiping out and losing your ski gear) after confusing a “follow me” direction with “don’t follow me.” I avoided tree wells and really “sent” it down pitches I didn’t think I was able to ski. I hiked in frigid sub zero temperatures to frozen waterfalls layering up in borrowed gear. And, I

ate food like a “normal” person. Up until Montana, I had spent my teenage years running on fumes. Here, I prepared salads for myself, cooked grilled cheese sandwiches, sliced grapefruits and feasted on spaghetti. To live in the mountains, to be active I needed to take care of myself. In Montana, among other things, I learned that food is essential fuel for my body. I wanted a future – not only a future playing in the mountains, but a future living life and feeling capable. The mountain high that I experienced on this trip was motivation for me to turn my life and my health around. Montana reminded me of what a life without being hungry and irritable could be like.





*Figure 6: Photo of the Grand Canyon by Brian Hemmick*

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### **Grand Canyon, Arizona: Traditional territory of the Havasupai, the Hopi, the Ute and others**

With a new mindset after my time in Montana and help from Brian, I began taking care of my body and my brain. Classes were going better for me and life was more enjoyable. Brian and I had never been to the Grand Canyon or even a desert environment, so we started planning a late spring road trip to the Southwest to continue to fuel the adventure bug that I caught in Montana. With a few friends to see along the way and a destination in mind, we packed up my car for a trip that I'll never forget. I geeked out with planning meals and packing our luggage in repurposed stacking kitty litter buckets. Brian and I had minimal gear and no plan. We saw vast landscapes and learned to work together as a team – Brian as the driver, me as the navigator. We found places to camp along the way, while experiencing sun, snow and rain. I will never forget the smallness I felt in the desert with the big open sky and rich golden colors. I knew that the land and

mountains did not care how big or small I was or even if I existed in the same space. Somehow, I found peace in this realization.

But with all of this excitement and scenery, I continued to struggle with voices in my head. My return to a healthy lifestyle with substantial nutrition and physical activity still shocked me to the core. My body reacted by storing all my food, not knowing if I would continue to feed and nourish it. As my hormones adjusted I felt out of control with my larger bodily systems. I broke down one morning at the Desert View campsite because my pants didn't fit. I didn't know how to communicate my needs other than to curl up in a ball and be shameful of my body. In a state of confusion and despair, I almost left Desert View and everything I had worked so hard to accomplish - my health, my relationship, adventure. Brian was able to talk me out of this funk and together we packed up camp and went to the canyon's rim to find peace.

This adventure into a world of parks and wild places helped me find direction in life and recognize that I still had work to do in terms of my mental and physical health. I returned home with a new hobby, something new to devote all my time and energy to, rather than eating issues or partying. I surprisingly quit smoking cigarettes during the trip, realizing how counterproductive smoking was if I was trying to be healthy in all aspects of my life. I had new motivation in school, finding a major with Parks and Recreation, a discipline I had no idea existed until this trip.





*Figure 7: Photo of a meadow in the Absarokas by Rachael Grasso*

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### **Absaroka Range, Wyoming: Traditional territory of the Crow, the Cheyenne and others**

I traveled to the Absaroka Range with a group of strangers for my longest backcountry adventure to date. I enrolled in an outdoor educator course with NOLS, the National Outdoor Leadership School, knowing the experience would teach me leadership and refine my skill set. I did not know, however, how unprepared I was and how physically challenging it would be. Each day we traveled with heavy packs through rugged terrain. This was my first experience moving through tall mountains (over 10,000 feet) with everything I needed on my back. I was one of the weakest links on my course and was intimidated by the outdoor experience of my other course mates. This lack of confidence and competence limited my participation and perhaps hindered my performance. At the time, I thought that this experience was exactly what I needed to build character and increase my technical skills. I felt that I had grown so much by just making it through each day. Looking back, I wasn't supported in the ways I could have been. There were four women students on the course and nine men. While we had even



representation on the instructor team (two women, two men), I often felt incapable and not nearly strong enough as my male course mates. I knew that I had to continue to take care of my body and my mind on this course – I was part of a team and already a weak member. I didn't want to be perceived as incapable and helpless.

While we had many classes and discussions on leadership, especially NOLS's seven styles of leadership, we never talked about power structures and gender roles. We didn't speak of women as leaders. Perhaps it was assumed as we had women instructors on the course. However, this entire perspective and area of thought was disturbingly absent. We also did not talk about the exclusivity and privilege of the course itself, its high price tag and demand for leaving work for a month to travel through the backcountry. We did not acknowledge that we were all white privileged people and how that affected our lives and opportunity in the frontcountry. For years, I had always seen this experience as pivotal for me in my technical skills and leadership, but now, as I reflect back, this course only supported the hegemonic discourse in outdoor and environmental leadership.



*Figure 8: Photo of Beam Rocks by Rachael Grasso*

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### **Laurel Highlands, Pennsylvania: Traditional territory of the Iroquois, the Osage and others**

Here we are again, back in Pennsylvania, the Keystone state. A homecoming, if you will. Despite mention of all of these adventurous places we just visited together, most of my lived experience has been in Pennsylvania. I graduated from Penn State, I am a diehard Steelers fan, and when given the option, I eat my veggie burgers with coleslaw and French fries on top, like a true 'Burgher. With my college degree in outdoor recreation, I took to the Laurel Highlands, a hilly forested area in southwestern Pennsylvania, to start my career in the outdoors. At Penn State I had my first few outdoor jobs, working with incoming freshmen on backpacking trips – similar to the sea kayaking trip in Alaska I spoke of earlier. I had my first real outdoor job where I was in charge of young kids during an adventure day camp. And I had interned and lead trips for the school's Adventure Recreation Program. I learned patience and practice while longing for larger peaks and opportunity out west. I also learned more about myself and the

outdoor industry than I could have imagined. I followed up my Penn State experience by working as a snowboard instructor and a river guide in the Laurel Highlands. I will share some insights from these seasons outdoors.

Teaching snowboarding was one of my first introductions into how gendered and sexist the outdoor industry was. Snowboarding has notoriously been a sport dominated by white men taking risks: going fast, sending it off jumps and grinding boxes and rails. As a young woman entering the field, I was reserved and unsure of my ability. I was selected to work in the children's program, teaching four to seven year olds, due to my maternal instincts – of course a young woman will be great with small children. I was able to outfit the kids, babysit them while they ate, and basically just chased after them on their tiny boards as they careened down the hill. Forget about the technique and progressions I was drilled on during training. Was I put in this position because I was not good enough? Because I did not take risks or ride fast like the boys did? Why were most of the women working with the little kids? Even though I was well on my way to recovery with my mental health, after years of not feeling adequate in life, here I was, thrown back into the same feelings in a field that I had fallen in love with.

My time on the Youghioghney River followed a similar trend. Macho men showing off their confidence by taking a line through a class IV rapid that they weren't quite ready for. Again, even though I had the finesse with my paddle strokes and took conservative lines, I was put on the family friendly stretch of river for quite some time my first season, while my male coworkers were put directly on the class III-IV stretch... even though they swam customers and flipped their boats. When I finally was put on the Lower Yough, I rocked it. I never flipped a boat with customers, but still my competence was doubted. I'd get boats full of men who weren't comfortable having a woman as a guide. They'd ignore my paddle commands and throw in rouge strokes as we neared rapids. I found myself laughing at derogatory sexist jokes and even telling my customers "caution woman driver" as I bounced off of a rock. I'd get more women volunteering to be in my boat because they assumed I'd take a safe route and look out for them more so than a male guide. On high water days sometimes the company would throw another male guide into my boat with me to "help me out". Was it really helping, or was it blatantly saying, "we don't think you can do this alone, this man can help you." My coworkers saw me as "one of the guys" or like "a sister" but I wasn't either of those. I did prefer that categorization over being harassed and seen as an object like many of the female customers. Sure this may not have been the company's or my coworkers' intentions, but it was real and it affected me daily. However, this experience taught me more than how oppressed women are in the guiding industry. I learned how to speak up for my needs by choosing the size raft I paddled and whether or not I felt comfortable to set safety in a technical rapid. I developed my communication skills within the raft on when to give commands and to speak up. I learned decision-making skills and gained confidence in my ability as a guide even though I took the conservative lines.





*Figure 9: Photo of North Fork Valley by Rachael Grasso*

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### **North Fork Valley, West Virginia: Traditional territory of the Iroquois and others**

The North Fork Valley has been an incredible teacher for me. Just south of Pennsylvania and slightly more “wild and wonderful” and rugged, this landscape in the ancient Appalachian Mountains holds a special place in my heart. These old mountains and jagged Tuscorora Sandstone flanks have seen me laugh, cry, and grow as an outdoorswoman and educator. They have also seen the destructive cycles of industrialization and commodification of the natural world.

My story begins at Seneca Rocks - tall technical rock and an east coast climbing mecca. Here I have had two incredibly different experiences. I climbed my first ever multi-pitch and traditional routes here at Seneca. I participated in an all women’s program, cleverly titled Chicks With Nuts, that focused on learning climbing basics in an all women-identifying group. In all of my time spent thus far being “one of the guys” this was my first outdoor skill-based outing with only other women. The atmosphere was incredibly welcoming and I noticed a lack of competition that I hadn’t experienced in my

professional outdoor life. We left judgment aside and focused on climbing rocks together, sharing tips and tricks while being incredibly encouraging of one another. I let my true self shine through, giggling while sharing stories, and not being afraid to ask questions. The ladies were supportive, so much so that I didn't feel a need to doubt my ability and second-guess myself.

As we digest that happy experience, I'll share the second. A year after Chicks with Nuts, I joined a local outing club's Mountaineering School. This was a very macho program with fitness tracking and excessive risk. We met twice a month for class and had monthly outings to focus on different technical skills. The trip to Seneca Rocks was a winter themed alpine climbing outing, that consisted of hiking all night to the base of the rocks, climbing the rocks and bivying on the summit. My team, two men and I, made it fine through the night hike and arrived at the base of the rocks alongside other groups. This outing was not framed as a competition, but with only a few icy routes to choose from, it quickly turned into one. Some of the teams' leads had never led the routes, let alone with packs, mountaineering boots or in icy conditions. We were cold, exhausted and waiting patiently for our turn to climb. As all the groups passed us and "borrowed" our experienced leader, we were losing daylight and motivation. I calculated in my head the number of bivy spots and realized that by the time we started climbing, waited for those ahead of us to finish, and approached the summit, it would be dark and space would be limited. I voiced my concern and my partner agreed with me that it wasn't worth the climb. We headed down towards a cave where we drank our summit beers and cooked food. Well after dark, two teams joined us after arriving to the summit with no place to bivy. They rappelled and descended in the dark. This whole scenario made me uneasy. I hardly knew all of these men who were making decisions and taking risks that seemed unnecessary. My opinions were not validated by the larger group and men didn't understand why I decided not to climb. This outing was a turning point for me. After all of the time I had spent in the classroom and in the field discussing risk, here were a bunch of macho engineers and weekend warriors duking out their manliness. I had not spent years overcoming and managing my mental health to be involved in a shortsighted accident. I wasn't having fun and did not feel supported. It was on this trip that I realized that WHO I adventure with and WHY I go is far more important to me than just getting out there for the sake of doing it.





*Figure 10: Photo of the Picket Range by Angela Burlile*

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**North Cascades, Washington: Traditional territory of the Upper Skagit, Sauk Suiattle, Nlaka’pamux, Swinomish, Nooksack and others**

My graduate program is the reason I am living here calling Washington’s North Cascades home. The lessons I have learned go far beyond the academic curriculum within the program. I have learned about leadership in these mountains and the importance of community. My cohort is predominantly female identifying, which has given me invaluable experiences in the mountains among other strong, badass women. I have learned to go into the mountains by myself and listen to my instincts while ignoring the negative voices in my head. This landscape has taught me to question all I’ve been taught about land and territory. I have appreciated staying mostly in one place through this program to notice the natural rhythms and cycles in nature – the arrival of bald eagles in winter, the first thrushes and songbirds of spring, the first dusting of snow in the mountains and the first blooms of wildflowers. Among all of these observations, I’ve also been stretched incredibly thin and have worked the hardest I have in my life. Obligations

to programs, assignments, personal life and relationships have dominated my thought process and consumed my energy. With all of these stressors, feelings of anxiety, depression and inadequacy returned. I learned here in these mountains that my mental health and wellbeing is fragile and sensitive. To prevent relapse and stay sane, I prioritized healthy eating, spent time by the Skagit River, and rode too many days to count on my snowboard at Mt. Baker. I've learned that maintaining my mental health is a lifelong journey. When I feel stressed I go into the mountains or to the rivers and experience the smallness that I can only feel in these places. It humbles me and refocuses my thoughts.



*Figure 11: Photo of Methow Valley sunset by Rachael Grasso*

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## **Gratitudes**

Before making sense of all of these experiences and identifying common threads throughout, I want to express gratitude to mentors, family and friends.

**Mom** – thank you for EVERYTHING. You have always been there for me and I would not be half the woman I am today if it weren't for all of your sacrifices and for setting an amazingly strong and brave example. Words cannot express how much you mean to me.

Thank you to **Joe**, too, for being there for my Mom and for not giving up on me, even though it took awhile for me to come around. For not only marrying my mom, but also me and my sister and the patience required for that role. I know you could never get me to go camping with you, but I enjoy all of our recent adventures.

**Brian** – thank you for always supporting my adventurous decisions. For being patient while I spent six years of our relationship in school and for helping my recovery from



eating disorders and addiction. As I've shared throughout this presentation, I wouldn't be standing here today if it weren't for you. We make an amazing team.

**C16** - thank you for going through this intense graduate experience with me. I can't imagine having any other folks with me on this journey or doing it alone. We have grown to know each other so well over the last twenty months. And thank you for loving Jack and Squeaks as if they were your own.

**Joshua** - thank you for introducing me to northwest natural history and appreciating my many pastel colored spreadsheets. I am grateful for the opportunities you gave me to lead my peers and for your trust in my judgment in the backcountry.

**Lindsey** - thank you for being a boss and a badass. You have been an amazingly strong role model in leadership and life and your work within communities is inspiring.

**Gene Nick Nini** - thank you all for challenging me academically and helping to dust off some of the cobwebs in my brain in terms of critical theory and literature. Thanks to you all, I have "embraced the awkwardness"

**C17** - for having no choice but to trust my leadership and experience on the Skagit River and along the Cascade Crest and being present during capstones to support C16.



*Figure 11: Photo of the Sauk and Skagit by Angela Burlile*

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## **Synthesis and Conclusion**

For many of you readers, this might be your first time hearing all of these stories. Not often do I share my personal feelings and deep experiences, especially to those I don't know intimately. But in order to heal and move forward, I felt the need to be brave and vulnerable, inviting you into my thoughts and my past selves. Keeping these stories hidden does not help anyone. Perhaps by speaking my truths I can help others who may be grappling with similar illnesses.

Looking through these experiences and bringing them to light has been a journey in and of itself for me. It's kept me grounded and helped me feel motivated in this work. I am driven by experience and a quest to be my best self. There are common themes in these stories worthy of further exploration – strong women leaders and mental health and wellness.

Since their conceptions and foundations, the modern environmental movement and outdoor industry have both been dominated by white men. Stories of strong women



leaders are harder to find than those of brave bold men and often include stereotypical caregiving and nurturing behaviors. Recently, especially with the recent celebration of international women's day, we hear of women leaders and adventurers. But simply hearing of them is not enough, and why for only one day or month of the year? We need to showcase these women in the same capacity as we do men. We need to celebrate the diverse approaches to leadership displayed by women worldwide.

Mental health and wellbeing plays a vital role in daily life, yet in today's society it is often silenced and stigmatized. I have found healing in mountainous landscapes. My role as a leader in outdoor pursuits has held me accountable in my mental illness and allowed time and space for me to reflect on my feelings and actions.

My journey forward includes inspiring more women and girls to be involved in the outdoors. I want to continue to find supportive learning and recreating communities with like-minded people. My work will include helping others find peace with mental illness through outdoor experiences. I look forward to many more landscapes and lessons for the rest of my life.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, stylized font. The signature is enclosed within a light blue, semi-transparent rectangular box.