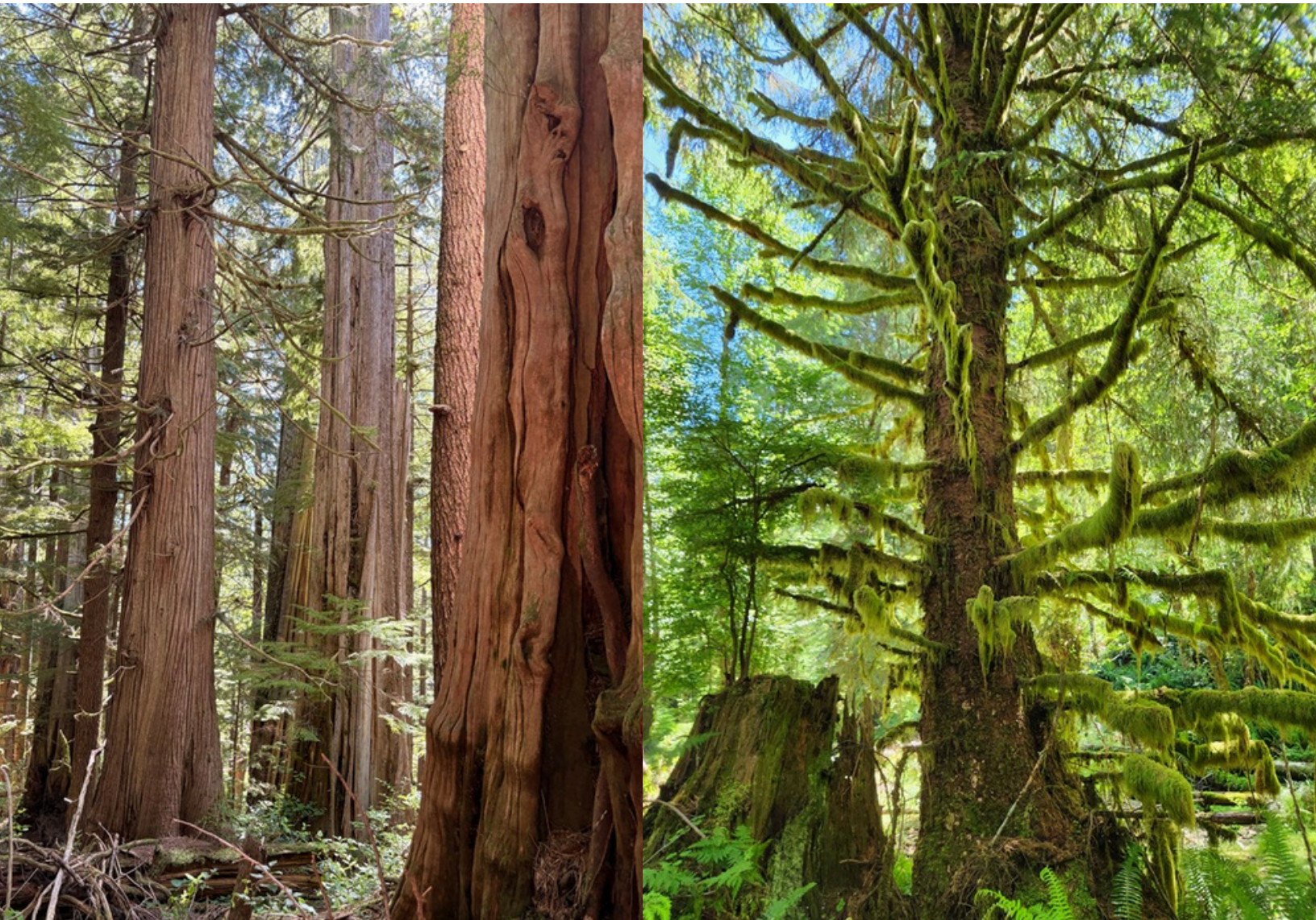


NORTHWEST INNOVATIVE FORESTRY SUMMIT

Restoring Watersheds | Reimagining Forests



Forest Stewards
 **Guild**

Ellsworth Preserve, WA | June 2026

RESTORING WATERSHEDS | REIMAGINING FORESTS



Group photo at Ellsworth Preserve

In June 2026, 55 participants from across the Pacific Northwest gathered at The Nature Conservancy's Ellsworth Creek Preserve near Willapa Bay, Washington, for the 2026 Northwest Innovative Forestry Summit (NIFS). The Summit brought together landowners, foresters, Tribal representatives, conservation organizations, researchers, agency staff, and community leaders to explore a central question: How can active forest stewardship restore ecological function

while sustaining resilient communities and economies?

This year's Summit focused on watershed-scale restoration, ecological forestry, and the partnerships required to steward forests through a changing climate and challenging times. Over three days, participants explored forests, streams, roads, estuaries, and old-growth stands while discussing the practical and philosophical challenges of restoration.



Left: Driving through the Ellsworth Creek Preserve | Middle: Participants gathered each evening at Ocean Park, WA for sunsets, campfires, and conversations that carried the Summit beyond the field. | Right: Participants explore a towering old-growth western red cedar forest. All photos taken by Forest Stewards Guild unless otherwise noted.



GROUNDING IN PLACE

The Summit began with a welcome from representatives of the Chinook Indian Nation, who shared the history of the Willapa Bay region, perspectives on stewardship, and the ongoing work of the Nation to maintain connections to their ancestral homelands. Participants also learned more about the contemporary work of the Chinook Indian Nation, whose ancestral territory stretches from Tillamook Head north along the Pacific Coast, encompassing Willapa Bay and the lower Columbia River. Although the Chinook Indian Nation continues to seek clarification of its federal recognition, its stewardship responsibilities have never ceased. The Nation emphasized that its sovereignty stems from its enduring relationship with the land and its ancestors—not from federal acknowledgment—and that caring for forests, rivers, and coastal ecosystems is both a cultural obligation and a commitment to future generations.

Today, the Chinook Indian Nation actively partners with conservation organizations, public agencies, and the forestry sector to restore ecosystems, advance sustainable forestry, expand opportunities for traditional gathering and stewardship, and build co-management relationships that benefit both Tribal citizens and the broader community. Throughout the event, participants returned repeatedly to the importance and challenges of reciprocity in land stewardship.

Rather than viewing forests solely as resources to manage or ecosystems to restore, discussions emphasized reciprocal relationships between people and place. Stewardship was framed not simply as what we take from the land or what we do to it, but what responsibilities we hold in return. This perspective resonated deeply throughout the Summit and influenced many of the conversations that followed.

One especially meaningful moment came when the Chinook Nation shared muktuk with participants. Earlier this month, a gray whale had beached itself in a nearby river. One of the Summit participants was there to see it take its last breath, and after receiving permission from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Nation harvested the whale according to traditional practices. Sharing that food with Summit participants was an extraordinary act of generosity and hospitality. For most attendees, it was their first experience with muktuk and offered a tangible reminder that stewardship, culture, and community are deeply interconnected.



Top: A view across Willapa watershed

Middle: Tree rings tell the story of past forest management and decades of growth.

Bottom: Grey whale muktuk. Rich in nutrients, this small piece contains ~ 900 calories.

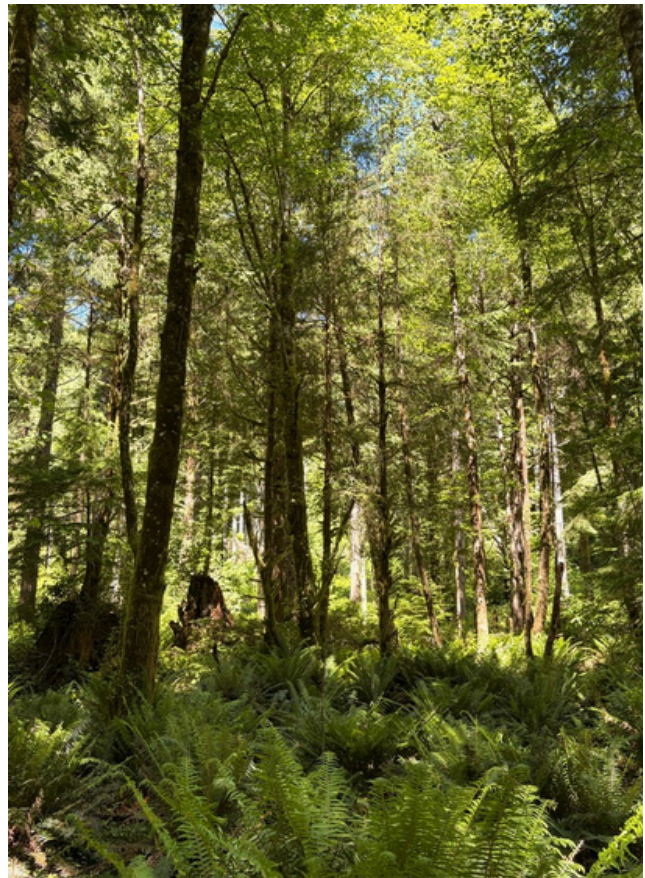


LEARNING FROM A LIVING LABORATORY

The second day was spent in the field exploring Ellsworth Creek Preserve, a landscape where decades of experimentation, monitoring, and adaptive management are helping answer some of the Pacific Northwest's most pressing forestry questions. Once managed as an industrial timber landscape, the preserve now serves as a place to test how ecological forestry, watershed restoration, and active management can work together to restore resilient forests while generating lessons that are transferable to working forests throughout the region. Throughout the Summit, participants were encouraged not only to observe what had been accomplished at Ellsworth, but also to consider which practices, successes, and lessons could be adapted to other landscapes facing similar challenges.



Pre-commercial thinning control site. At 750 trees per acre, note lack of understory. There was also a lack of birds or other forest animals.



Pre-commercial thinning site. Lop and scatter and silviculture practices to advance older forest conditions through variable density thinning have been applied.

Participants explored and discussed a pre-commercial thinning project designed to accelerate the development of older forest characteristics. One of the most compelling lessons from this stop was the importance of creating prescriptions that are both ecologically sound and operationally achievable.

The thinning strategies intentionally favored species such as Sitka spruce and western red cedar while reducing dense hemlock stands. Managers retained clumps of trees, created larger skip areas, protected shrubs, and preserved unique features such as old stumps. The goal was not simply to reduce tree density, but to create future forests with large crowns, diverse structure, and greater habitat complexity.



As one presenter noted, developing a complex ecological vision is often easier than translating that vision into a strategy that can actually be implemented in the field. Effective forestry often requires distilling complicated ideas into practical actions that crews can cost effectively execute consistently and successfully.



Left: Engineered log jams recreate natural stream complexity, providing habitat for fish while slowing water and improving channel stability. | Right: Forest and stream restoration work hand in hand, demonstrating how healthy watersheds depend on thoughtful stewardship across the entire landscape.

Participants also explored a stream restoration site where engineered log jams were installed alongside commercial thinning treatments. Discussions highlighted the importance of integrating upland forest management with stream and aquatic restoration. The project demonstrated how forests and streams function as connected systems rather than separate management objectives.



Road decommissioning is a critical tool for watershed restoration, reducing long-term impacts while allowing streams and landscapes to function more naturally.

Another stop examined road decommissioning efforts designed to restore hydrologic function and reduce long-term impacts on watersheds. Participants observed sidecast pullback and recontouring work and discussed the ongoing tension between maintaining access and restoring natural watershed processes.

One of the most striking stories came from a restored stream reach where steelhead and chum salmon returned only one month after restoration was completed. Fish had been absent from the site for more than 75 years following extensive logging and associated watershed impacts. Their rapid return provided a powerful reminder of nature's resilience when habitat barriers are removed.



THE IMPORTANCE OF OLD FORESTS

The Summit concluded with a visit to an old-growth western red cedar grove containing trees approaching 1,000 years of age. Standing beneath these massive trees provided an opportunity to reflect on the long-term goals of forest stewardship and what restoration ultimately seeks to achieve.

Conversations there also highlighted the needs of the marbled murrelet, a small federally listed seabird whose survival depends on conditions found primarily in older forests. Many participants, myself included, came away with a deeper appreciation for just how specialized these habitat requirements are. Marbled murrelets nest on large moss-covered branches found high in old-growth trees—features that can take centuries to develop.

The discussion reinforced an important reality: restoring ecological function often requires thinking across timelines far longer than our projects, careers, or even lifetimes. The forests we steward today will shape habitat opportunities for generations to come.

Left: Important to the marbled murrelet, this towering western red cedar, estimated to be over 1,000 years old, is believed to have escaped harvest as loggers focused on the surrounding higher value timber. It now serves as a living reminder of the magnificent old-growth forests that once defined this landscape.



Nesting Marbled murrelet. Photo: Hamer Environmental



PARTNERSHIPS MATTER

A recurring theme throughout the Summit was the importance of partnerships. Whether discussing watershed restoration, prescribed fire, cultural stewardship, workforce development, or wildlife habitat, participants consistently emphasized that no single organization can achieve these goals alone.

The Summit featured perspectives from the Forest Stewards Guild, The Nature Conservancy, Columbia Land Trust, Northwest Natural Resource Group, Sustainable Northwest, the Intertribal Timber Council, Oregon State University, Washington State University, Hyla Woods, the Chinook Indian Nation, oyster growers, and many others. Together, these conversations highlighted the value of collaborative approaches that bridge ownership boundaries, disciplines, and perspectives.

Perhaps most importantly, the Summit created space for relationship building. Participants shared lessons learned, challenged assumptions, explored difficult questions, and built connections that will continue long after the event itself.



The Northwest Innovative Forestry Summit demonstrated that resilient forests depend on resilient partnerships. Participants left with new ideas, stronger relationships, and a shared commitment to stewardship.



Lunch at Ellsworth Cabin: Shared meals created space for informal conversations, helping participants connect across organizations, disciplines, and backgrounds while building trust that extends beyond the Summit.

RESTORATION SILVICULTURE IN PRACTICE



Participants explore restoration silviculture at the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge

Many participants extended their Summit experience by joining an optional third day focused on restoration silviculture at Willapa National Wildlife Refuge. Hosted by staff from the Refuge and The Nature Conservancy, the field tour highlighted a unique partnership that combines the refuge's restoration objectives with TNC's forestry expertise to improve the structure and resilience of densely stocked young forests through ecological thinning. Participants explored restoration treatments firsthand and engaged in thoughtful discussions about the science, decision-making, and practical challenges of restoration silviculture, leaving with new ideas and lessons to apply in their own landscapes.

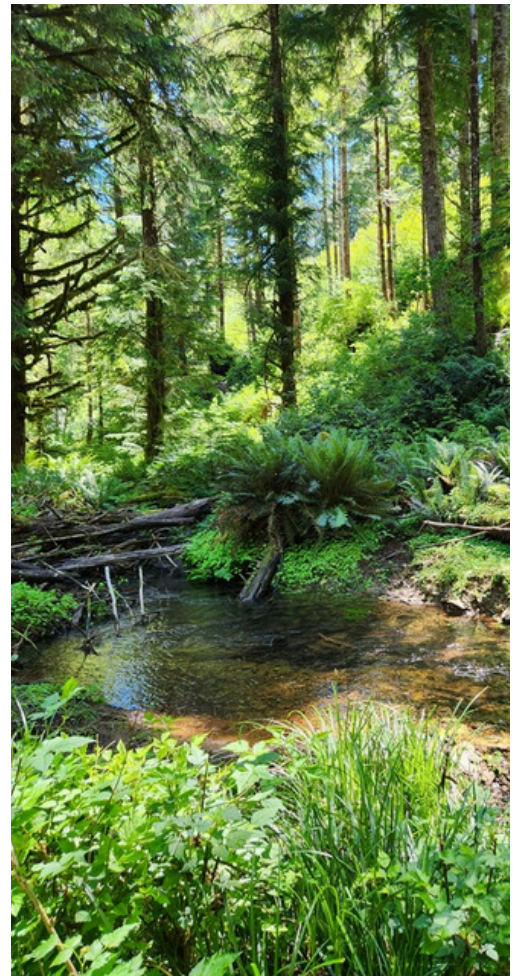


LOOKING AHEAD

The Northwest Innovative Forestry Summit has always been about more than showcasing interesting projects. It is about building a community of practice committed to stewarding forests in ways that are ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially meaningful, and working together to identify and reduce barriers to better forestry.

This year's gathering demonstrated that restoring watersheds and reimagining forests requires both technical expertise and strong relationships. It requires humility, curiosity, and a willingness to learn from one another. And it requires recognizing that healthy forests, healthy watersheds, and healthy communities are inseparable.

The conversations at Ellsworth Creek left participants with optimism that through collaboration, innovation, and stewardship grounded in both science and place, we can continue advancing resilient forests and communities throughout the Pacific Northwest.



From ancient forests, to decommissioned roads, to restored streams, the Summit highlighted how thoughtful stewardship and collaboration are shaping the future of Pacific Northwest forests through restoring watersheds and reimagining forests.

This report was produced by the Forest Stewards Guild and written by Esmé Cadiente, with ideas and content drawn from the 2026 Northwest Innovative Forestry Summit and its many partners and participants. Many thanks to Luke Dauner, Peter Hayes, the Chinook Indian Nation, The Nature Conservancy, Willapa National Wildlife Refuge, and the NIFS planning committee.

Photos by Esmé Cadiente & Mike Lynch with the Forest Stewards Guild.

