

Community Leadership Challenge Reflection:
Sustainability and Stewardship in Pittsburgh's Rock Climbing Community

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Author's note:

This reflection paper was written in 2022. Sustainability Club is an ongoing activity; as such, it continues to grow, evolve, and give back to the community. Numbers reported in 2022 may no longer be accurate.

Summary of Project

In December 2021, I created a Sustainability Club through my local rock climbing gym. We are a group of like-minded individuals with a shared passion for climbing and deep respect for the natural world. Together, we regularly meet up to climb, pick up litter, build trails, and organize other community stewardship events.

Introduction

In December 2021, I launched Sustainability Club through my local rock climbing gym ([Ascend](#)) in Pittsburgh, PA. We are a group of like-minded individuals with a shared passion for climbing and deep respect for the natural world. Our club mission is “to make the world a better place through environmental stewardship, community engagement, and the promotion of sustainable practices on and off the wall.” Our club values are “sustainability, environmental justice, responsible outdoor practices, curiosity, and respect.” Together, we regularly meet up to climb, pick up litter, help build access trails, organize community events, and volunteer with other environmental organizations.

My Master Plan is focused on fostering a holistic approach to conservation by combining ecological research with community engagement to address the impacts of mining-induced habitat destruction in the Appalachian region. As the mining industry wanes across Appalachia, outdoor recreation will likely be a boon to the region’s economy. Appalachia is home to some of America’s best-known outdoor climbing areas, like the New River Gorge in West Virginia and the Red River Gorge in Kentucky. Sustainability Club seemed like an excellent opportunity to share ecological knowledge and embrace Leave No Trace principles with climbers across the greater Pittsburgh area, as many of these individuals recreate in the aforementioned areas. Furthermore, Sustainability Club supports and advocates for brands of [climbing chalk](#) that come from water desalination instead of mining. We also volunteer alongside the Access Fund, a non-profit that directly works with stakeholders and lawmakers to prevent climbing areas from being misappropriated by industries such as mining (for example, you can read about their campaign to save Oak Flat—a climbing area located on ancestral Apache land—from mining [here](#)).

Part of the appeal of combining rock climbing with stewardship is the emerging popularity of the sport; for instance, in the U.S., 53 new climbing gyms opened in 2021 (Climbing Business Journal, 2022). In my experience, many climbers get their start indoors and move to outdoor climbing once they’ve grasped the sport’s foundations, which means that the influx of new gym climbers may portend an upcoming surge in outdoor participants. It is my belief that there is a need for climbing groups such as Sustainability Club, as we are able to help climbers reduce the environmental impact of their recreation through education and volunteerism. Burgin and

Hardinman (2012) suggest that a paradigm shift among outdoor recreationists is necessary to support ecological conservation concerns, and I believe Sustainability Club may assist to that end. It has also been suggested that volunteers are often motivated by the need to feel “competent, autonomous, and connected to others” (Larson et al., 2020). Personally, I’ve found these three qualities reinforced by the act of rock climbing. Combining volunteerism with climbing may help to solidify the bond between club members and maintain motivation to continue participating in the group.

Finally, studies (Oh and Ditton, 2008; Dunlap and Heffernan, 1975) have shown that there is a direct and positive correlation between participation in outdoor recreation, environmental concern, and environmental appreciation. This indicates that rock climbers, especially those who climb outdoors, are more likely to agree with land stewardship ethics. The sentiments of Sustainability Club ought to resonate with them.

Goals and Objectives

The Sustainability Club’s mission statement is “to make the world a better place through environmental stewardship, community engagement, and the promotion of sustainable practices.” The goal is to host regular and varied events and volunteer opportunities, as well as to maintain a friendly community of climbers who share the same environmental values.

Project Details

The Sustainability Club is an ongoing group that engages in regular activities. As of January 2023, we have 14 active members, excluding myself. Our most regular activity is our monthly club climb, which is held either at our gym or at local outdoor climbing spots (weather permitting). When we are able to climb outside, we always bring gloves and bags to pick up litter as we go. As club captain, I manage the club’s social media account, organize events, lead our monthly club climbs, and engage with community stakeholders. Some of our past activities have included:

- *An Earth Day event.* This event—which took place on April 23, 2022—included a neighborhood-wide litter cleanup in partnership with the [South Side Community Council](#). We also enlisted several local groups to set up booths at the gym. These groups included

[Brenckle's Organic Farm](#), which sold a variety of plants and gave out free heirloom seedlings; [Old Flame Mending](#), which mended torn clothing to prevent it from going into a landfill; [Allegheny Cleanways](#), which provided informational material about their community-driven dumpsite and riverfront cleanup non-profit organization; and the [Student Conservation Association](#), which provided informational material about their student-based land conservation organization. Finally, the event ended with a free community screening of [The Edmund Pettus Bridge to Climate Justice](#).

- *Free native wildflower seeds for all gym members.* In 2022, for the entire month of May, free packets of native wildflower seeds were available to gym members at the front desk. This was repeated in 2023 and 2024.
- *Stewardship weekend.* In collaboration with the [Access Fund](#) and the [Southwest PA Climbers Coalition](#), we spent the weekend of September 9-11, 2022, building trails, cleaning litter and illegal dump sites, and scrubbing rock walls around Pittsburgh's climbing areas.
- *Houseplant swap.* On November 19, 2022, we held a houseplant propagation swap. Participants could either bring in their own propagation or choose to donate \$5 to the gym's DEI initiative fund to receive a plant cutting. They also received raffle tickets to win several climbing items.
- *University of Pittsburgh's Students for Sustainability partnership.* On February 3, 2023, we provided free climbing day passes to members of Pitt's [Students for Sustainability](#) club and taught them the basics of climbing.
- *Downcycling old climbing shoes.* Starting in January 2023, at each of Ascend's three locations, a box is available for people to dispose of their old climbing shoes. We take these to a [North Face](#) outlet store, where the rubber soles are downcycled and used to create new products. As of March 2023, over 80 pairs of shoes have been donated.
- *Trail building at Girty's Woods Conservation Area.* On April 8, 2023, in collaboration with [Allegheny Land Trust](#), we conducted a trail workday to help improve access at the Girty's Woods Conservation Area.

Aside from these events, a big part of the Sustainability Club is its social media presence. As club captain, I manage the club's account and make regular posts to the club's [Instagram page](#). While most of our Instagram posts are meant to disseminate information regarding club climbs and events, I also create posts that discuss sustainability in the context of climbing. Information campaigns to educate the climbing community have been shown to improve the success of a climbing organization such as my Sustainability Club (Carter et al., 2021). The social media account is also used to recruit volunteers for opportunities hosted by other local environmental organizations. Finally, I like to highlight local and sustainable small businesses whenever possible. [Ascend's primary account](#) has over 10.3k Instagram followers, and they frequently share our club's content to their story, which means this information is spread to thousands of viewers.

Reflection and Conclusion

Due to the ongoing nature of the Sustainability Club, the metrics to measure success are constantly changing. Each event and opportunity will have a different set of expectations and goals. There are really only two quantifiable success metrics that overlap between each experience: (1) Is the club maintaining its membership or (better yet) growing? (2) Is the club active? For the former, the club has been a success: our first meeting only included six people, whereas now we're at 14 regular members. For the latter, "active" means not just meeting once a month to climb, but to also have at least one additional event quarterly.

Of the past events detailed previously, the only one I would deem unsuccessful was the houseplant swap. The event was poorly advertised (the digital assets the gym wanted me to use for spreading the word weren't made available until the day before the event) and turnout was low. Otherwise, all of the other events had a high turnout and went smoothly. At the time of this writing, it is estimated that the Sustainability Club has completed over 70 collective work hours volunteering as environmental stewards.

Although it is not a quantifiable measure, I think the best proof of the Sustainability Club's success is the close bonds we've formed among members. An anecdote: during our January 2023 club climb, I overheard one of the original members talk to someone who had just joined the club and was meeting everyone for the first time. She said, "You'll have fun with us. The club saved

my life.” Part of me thinks she was being hyperbolic, but the other part remembers that this particular member joined the club as a way of meeting new people after moving to a new city. She is also someone who is very open about her difficulties with mental health, in particular anxiety. Climbing is a sport inherently built on trust: you have to trust yourself, your body, your judgment; you also have to trust your friends with your life when they’re holding the rope that spells the difference between a short fall and death. Creating a group built on shared values and cemented by that kind of trust is no small victory.

Through this experience, I’ve found that a lot of people really want to help the world, but they don’t know where to start. Even I struggled with this at the beginning; at first, I just wanted people to tell me what they wanted out of the club. This proved ineffective. Soon enough, however, I found that leadership in this role means being decisive and saying, “We’re going to do XYZ volunteer project this weekend”—more often than not, it seems like that’s all people need to go out and engage with their community. It also helps that I’ve been able to form a genuine friendship with each of my club members and connect with them on a personal level. I love how much we’ve done already, and I can’t wait to go out and keep doing more.

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Appendix - Documentation

- The Sustainability Club's Instagram (@ascendsustainabilityclub) can be found [here](#). This is the best place to find documentation of the club's activity.
- Details and photos from the 2022 Earth Day Event can be found [here](#).
- Ascend's Sustainability Club's information (citing myself as the captain) can be found [here](#).
- The Explorer Club of Pittsburgh's page sharing the Sustainability Club's information can be found [here](#).