

# I Am a Catalyst for Change

BY AMANDA MAHAFFEY

I was in a room with five hundred women forest stewards. What?! When did that happen, ever? It happened at the inaugural Women's Forest Congress in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The congress was designed to inspire and empower women in the forest sector. This event was the culmination of years of work by women leaders in the field who felt that now was the time for a space dedicated to elevating the voices of women in the forestry profession.

The Women's Forest Congress was unlike any conference I have ever been to. The focus was not on forestry knowledge, though this group could offer a wealth of that, but rather on building connections and community so that together, we might address the world's greatest forest challenges. Why a Women's Forest Congress? Data and experience show that women are sadly underrepresented in the field and in leadership positions within the sector. The women who attended came from industry, academia, nonprofits, government, and everything in between. We represented thirty-eight states, three Canadian provinces, and eight other countries. We came as leaders, mid-career professionals, young foresters, and students. We came to share our passion for igniting a new role for women in forestry.

The program flowed through an arc of experience woven of the five

themes of the congress: Leadership for Equity and Inclusion; Workforce Opportunities for Increasing Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement; Women as Catalysts for Change; Addressing Today's Greatest Forest Challenges; and Supporting Each Other. Inspirational speakers from inside and outside the forestry profession taught us to commit ourselves to embodying the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. To never give up in our determination to blaze a path for girls who will come after us. To have each other's backs and affirm our truths. To support each other and lift each other up. To tell "herstory" in our sector's history in the past, present, and future. To paddle upstream together and breathe in the world around us. To laugh, dance, and celebrate who we are.

Breakout sessions felt more like collaborative workshops than the usual formal presentations. Rooms were packed to overflowing with women asking good questions, providing input in world cafés, and building connections through small group discussions. Special spaces for creativity, wellness, and nursing mothers set this meeting apart from traditional forestry conferences. In the midst of all this activity, delegates worked diligently to articulate declarations that would come out of the congress and establish a shared vision for the future of women in forestry. We heard powerful individual



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stories and universal support for one another. This special gathering of women was made even more impactful because of our shared experiences through the pandemic, which had a pronounced effect on women.

My mind is blown by the experience of the 2022 Women's Forest Congress. This landmark gathering invited us to bring our whole selves, on equal footing with our colleagues, and with plenty to accomplish together. As I return home, I know inside that I am changed by this experience. I am ready to inspire, train, and empower the women around me to be the change we want to see, to work together to steward our forests for the future.

**I am a woman forester.  
I am a catalyst for change.  
With others, I will rise,  
and we will shape  
the future.**

*Amanda Mahaffey is a deputy director of the Forest Stewards Guild and is based in Maine. This article was originally published on the Women's Forest Congress blog as "Women's Forest Congress Summary" at [womensforestcongress.org/blog](https://womensforestcongress.org/blog).*