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Deception Pass State Park Internship

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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Internship Title: Deception Pass State Park
Student Name: Sadie Sheller
Internship Dates: Jun. 24 2022 - Sept. 7 2022

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STUDENT SIGNATURE Sadie Sheller
DATE: 08/22/2022

Deception Pass State Park

Sadie Sheller

As an environmental science student at Western Washington University (WWU), we are given the option to partake in a senior project, thesis, study abroad, or an internship program to graduate. I chose to find an internship, as I felt that this would be the most helpful for myself moving forward. I spent my final summer quarter interning at Deception Pass State Park as a beach naturalist. I found out about the position through an advisor at WWU. I was originally hesitant to apply due to the distance, yet I have enjoyed my time at the pass this summer. While I am currently not sure what my plan is after college, I am glad to have had the opportunity that allows me to learn more about my passions in a beautiful setting.

My learning objectives for the summer were to improve my skills speaking to lay audiences, as well as to solidify what I have learned in the past about the ocean and tidepool environments. I wanted to be able to deepen my understanding of the world around me while sharing my love for the natural world with park visitors in the hopes that they too would decide they love the natural world as well.



Figure 1. Photo of Rosario Beach tidepools. A great blue heron stands in the shallows, fishing. Photo taken August 2022 by author.

Deception Pass is a Washington state park, located between Whidbey and Fidalgo Islands. It was named in 1792 by George Vancouver, an explorer who felt deceived by the topography of the area. Originally, he believed the pass was a bay, and Whidbey Island to be a peninsula rather than an island (Long, 2004). 2022 marks the 100-year anniversary of Deception Pass becoming a state park. Before the area became a state park, however, it was nearly sold to

private developers by the US Department of War. Instead, President Warren G. Harding reserved the land for state park purposes (DPPF, n.d.). The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) helped to create the beautiful state park that nearly two million people can enjoy each year, making it the most visited state park in Washington (WSP, 2022).

Responsibilities

Discovery Center

My primary duty as a beach naturalist is to provide informal, understandable interpretation to park visitors about the environment of the tidepools at Rosario Head. There were three main activities for the interns—with the help of other park volunteers, we ran a small educational table with tidepool specimens, as well as supervised the tidepools. The interns alone ran the Discovery Center, where tidepool specimens and more were kept on display. These specimens included river and sea otter pelts, as well as a few gray whale bones and some common organisms found in the tidepools at Rosario Beach. The Discovery Center was built by the CCC, a program created during the Great Depression by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (DPPF, n.d.). Because the tidepools are so close to the Discovery Center, and often more visited than our educational center, people tended to focus more on the mammals rather than the tidepool specimens, surprised to learn that there are otters in the area. Doing research on these animals was necessary for myself to be able to substantially inform curious visitors, and it was fun to watch people get excited as they learned. I also enjoyed my time researching without the premise of a school assignment—I was learning just to learn.



Figure 2. Crafts created by visitors to the discovery center. The display includes octopus, jellyfish, and more. Pictured in the bottom right is parts of the gray whale display. Photo taken August 2022 by author.

In addition to the pelts and bones, the Discovery Center was provided with two microscopes with which we examined water samples from Bowman Bay and different plant life from the area. Water samples were taken with a simple plankton net, and an effort was made to scrape any algae in the hopes of collecting a variety of organisms. Crafting was also an activity offered in the Discovery Center; a popular choice among children, most constructing an octopus

or a jellyfish. While the children were crafting was an easy time to teach them some basics about the animals they were creating. A simple interactive food chain was present, as well as a felt board showing the different intertidal zones. A great number of people came in simply to ask directions, while others were very excited to learn or simply had never seen the building open before and were curious.

Tidepools

On days I was not scheduled in the Discovery Center, I chose between working at the education table and the tidepools. In the tidepools, the first and foremost responsibility was to the ecosystem. Although we were excited to share the tidepools with park visitors, there was always an emphasis on safety and protecting the organisms that live there. When staffed alone, I would set up signs to help direct people to the entrance, where from there the explorers follow a rope system taking them in a guided loop through the tidepools. This is to minimize the damages we cause to the ecosystem. It is easy to notice the path even if you can't quite see the rope, because the path is visibly downtrodden. Algae does not survive for long where there is constant and consistent foot traffic. Even just a few feet away from the path, there is more plant life and thus habitat for the inhabitants of the tidepools. It was my duty to welcome any tidepool explorers and give them a rundown of the rules, stressing to stay on the path and not to disturb the animals, for these reasons. To make the experience more interactive, in the mornings I went out and found organisms to point out to visitors, setting up a cone to draw attention, with a small card showing what we were trying to point out. These cards also had a tidbit of information. Throughout the summer, many visitors praised the system that we had set up, as they were able to learn even when someone couldn't be in the tidepools with them. A great number also told me they



Figure 3. A keyhole limpet rests on a rock among the rockweed, partially submerged. This limpet was particularly large compared to other individuals in the area. This was my favorite organism because the limpet's body is exposed. This limpet was a great reference when informing people that limpet shells house animals. Photo taken August 2022 by author.

wouldn't have been able to find the organisms themselves, and that they had more fun than they would have without the cones and cards.

When I was out in the tidepools, I herded the occasional groups that ventured too far from the rope but more often I spent my time engaging with the park visitors. Often, they still needed help finding animals, even with the cone and card to guide them. I learned that it takes practice to be able to find some of the organisms with better disguises, and that knowledge of the intertidal zones is helpful. One of the most difficult things I encountered was stopping kids from touching the animals. To many children, it didn't seem like they thought they were doing any harm to creatures that look so different from us. Introducing the idea to them, that what lives in the tidepools is, in fact, alive and with feelings, was successful most of the time: if a giant picked *them* up from their room at home and put them down a few blocks away, would *they* like that? Probably not! When not pointing things out, I had conversations with the visitors. A lot of people had questions, while many others had none. Others simply wanted to make a small connection; talk about their day, or the environment, or what I was up to after college.

Education Table

The education table was my favorite of the three shift activities. I found it the easiest to



Figure 4. A blood star rests in a shallow pool of water. The center of its body peaks out, and one arm is shorter than the others. Photo taken August 2022 by author.

talk to people, as well as to inform them. Having so many specimens available to touch and turn over makes it easier to present information, as people have a visual and physical thing to learn with. When staffing the education table, we would set up at the picnic tables nearest the tidepools. The park has a wonderful display of specimens—different sea stars, crabs, mollusk shells and more. My favorite was a rather large hermit crab found by a fellow volunteer. The reason I thought it was easier to engage is because of how the table was set up. With the Discovery Center, the building is rather out of the way from the Rosario side of the park, and sometimes

people felt a little intimidated to come inside. The table, however, is out in the open and is near the beach, where most people who go to the Rosario picnic area spend some time. In addition, while there are pelts and bones to touch, they are not as easy to handle as the smaller tidepool specimens. The variety of creatures had something that pleased or impressed everyone, and because there were so many, it was a little easier to keep everyone interested if they wanted to continue looking and touching if they didn't want to hear about whatever I was saying at the moment. It also got kids excited because they aren't allowed to touch the organisms in the tidepools but here they could handle the specimens so long as they were gentle. We also had more resources with the education table—pamphlets and guidebooks for plants and animals of the rocky intertidal zone or the Pacific Northwest Coast. I learned a lot from these books, and they helped me to inform the visitors. I also learned quite a bit from the other volunteers. Many of them have been volunteering as beach naturalists for multiple years, some even decades.

Reflection

My time spent at Rosario this summer really helped to solidify much of what I have learned about the ocean and maritime environments. What I found to be the most applicable to my time was what kinds of organisms live in which intertidal zones. This is something that while I learned it and practiced with it at WWU, it didn't become solidified for myself until I started applying that knowledge. Knowing about the world is important, but just knowing isn't enough—you need to be able to understand and apply your learning to help draw conclusions. I was able to better learn where certain organisms lived because of where I was able to find them. Many people asked to see sea stars, and while at first I would help them look I quickly realized that they live in the lower intertidal zone, a place that is least often exposed. Through our efforts to find certain organisms, I was able to explain to people why they couldn't see certain things at certain times, and I feel that I was able to help them understand this special ecosystem a little better.

Another goal of mine was to improve my skills in speaking to lay audiences. At first, I struggled with this, not necessarily in the terms of speaking, but more knowing what information to offer or when was a “good” time to insert myself in a conversation. I struggled due to the informality of my position, but eventually I saw this to be a good thing. It became clear to me that most people are happy for the opportunity to learn, and they are pleased to hear something new about an organism they previously thought mundane. I spent my time trying to put emphasis into the intangible things the tidepools provide for not only us, but their inhabitants. This idea was often old news to older visitors, but many children don't realize that everything in the tidepools is a living being, or why we value the slippery rockweed. These were the most rewarding conversations. Generally, once the children realized that the tidepools are teeming with life, they were more respectful and careful to not harm the environment.

The last thing I was hoping to gain through this internship is an idea of what direction I wish to go in next. Throughout college, I have been happy with my choice of environmental

science as my major, but I have always been concerned as to what my parents thought—they didn't think I would be able to find a job in my field, the idea of which has always caused me stress. However, this summer I met a great number of environmentalists with stable jobs. Meeting and knowing that these people had a job they were happy in made me feel immensely better about my choices and has allowed me to let go of some of the anxiety that has been following me. While I am still not certain which direction I want to go, I feel much more prepared and confident in what I learned through my major. Having a job where I need to stand 80 percent of the time did make me heavily reconsider how much labor I am willing to do, even if it is for restoration purposes. I feel more confident applying to jobs with internship experience under my belt, and now feel that I am more likely to aim higher for my first job out of college.

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