2022

Habitat Restoration Specialists Internship

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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
MAKE WAVES.

Internship Title: Habitat Restoration Specialists LLC, Restoration Crew Member

Student Name: Owen Donnelly

Internship Dates: 6/27/22 to 9/7/22

STUDENT SIGNATURE Owen Donnelly

DATE: 11/22/22

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This summer I worked for Habitat Restoration Specialists LLC as a habitat restoration crew member. I worked alongside fellow team members to complete various tasks, primarily the removal of a range of invasive species within the Pacific Northwest. Most of the work was conducted within King County on a mixture of county and privately owned land. This job gave me real-world experiences that built upon the classes I've taken at Western, such as plant identification and inter-ecosystem mechanisms. This internship provided me with skills that I can apply towards future jobs, both from the work itself and the process of getting hired for a job.

On the surface, this internship was what I liked to call “glorified weeding”, something that my co-workers and I would often joke about. That being said it was meaningful and fulfilling work, especially as we were able to see our progress at each site throughout the summer. The most common tasks on the job were herbicide application and invasive knockdown. Herbicide application is one of those treatment methods that as an environmental science major I wish we did not have to do a lot of as the impacts on the surrounding ecosystem can be pretty substantial and often go beyond the specific area of application. Due to this, I would ask questions about the herbicides we were using and how to use the herbicide to maximize the effectiveness on invasive species while reducing any possible impact on surrounding species. On a few job sites, we dealt with reed canary grass which was the core species in my environmental impact assessment project and it was very informative to be able to deal with the species in person because we had put so much work into studying how to

effectively deal with it without ever being able to put what we studied to the test. To me, this was one of the surprising opportunities to tie the job back to work I had just recently done and that ability to connect the project to my daily work was impactful. The other significant portion of the work we did was Himalayan blackberry knockdown using hedgers, as a majority of the sites we worked at had expansive blackberry growth. The goal of cutting down the blackberry was to both weaken the plant's ability to grow and create easier access for herbicide application when regrowth began. Due to Himalayan blackberries' ability to grow quickly and extremely densely, herbicide application was significantly more effective when applied to new growth as it increased the likelihood that the plant would completely uptake the herbicide. The other common invasives that we dealt with were Laurel, Holly, and Yellow archangel, which all required unique strategies to mitigate their growth. Along with invasive removal, we also did some planting of native species to replace the lost biomass. Planting native species works to stunt invasive regrowth by blocking out their sprouts, depending on the original invasive mitigation strategy we would often have to clear around the native species as invasive regrowths were extremely prevalent at some sites. Seeing the process for dealing with these invasive species was a great learning experience because just about every restoration project in the Pacific Northwest has the threat of invasives and the ones we dealt with on our job sites were some of the most common.

Another aspect of the job that helped me build my skills as a future environmentalist was the process of acquiring projects and creating different plans for the various sites. Since most of the job sites were owned by King County most of the bid proposals for sites were going directly to the county. Seeing how the proposals

differed between private and public land owners was informative and it was interesting to see that oftentimes public projects had the most competition. My boss, Derek Beauchemin, was constantly checking out new sites and developing proposals to make bids on new projects. Seeing him manage current projects with potential projects was important because even though it may seem like a lot of the work is pretty similar across most projects, the challenges each site and each season create meant that a lot of factors had to be balanced. I admired Derek for his ability to create plans for each site, but what I found to be most impressive was his ability to adapt to unforeseeable factors that each site and season proposed. Such as during a really hot stretch of weather, when he moved us to sites where we weren't as exposed to the sun so that we wouldn't burn out and thus could be more efficient and another time when the weather flipped to rain when we were supposed to apply herbicide, he'd be able to pivot to another project or another task at the same site that agreed with the inclement weather. This ability to remain flexible while also still being able to hold to a tight schedule impressed me and is something I want to take into other jobs in the future, especially in a field with so many variables that are constantly changing.

This past winter I began searching for an internship for the summer of 2022, the process was one that I haven't experienced before. It required me to reach out to a wide range of professionals across the environmental science spectrum. Dealing with various levels of government and organizations was a challenge that made me push myself to go beyond my comfort zone and face the possibility of rejection. The job I ended up getting wasn't my first choice and frankly was one of my lowest priorities. It was tough for me to face rejection from positions that I thought I had a good shot at getting,

however, this hurdle allowed me to take another look at the habitat restoration job (a job which I had done before a few summers ago) with a new perspective. I took this opportunity to take advantage of the knowledge that my employer and co-workers had acquired from years of working in this field. I pushed myself to constantly ask questions as to why we were doing certain restoration techniques or to memorize the names of native and non-native plants so that I could quickly identify them. I wanted to be able to connect the techniques we were using to deal with certain species to what I have learned in other classes. An example of this was bouncing ideas I had researched for my environmental impact assessment paper off my boss to understand how methods such as solarization could be applied to what we were doing. Changing how I approached this job drastically increased what I got out of the job and helped me cement core concepts from my classes.

As someone who isn't the most outgoing person, I worked hard to relate and have meaningful conversations with my co-workers which led to connections that I otherwise would not have made. The relations I gained from this job will stay with me and inform many of my future decisions regarding work and when I am seeking advice from others in the environmental science field. Being able to consistently have positive interactions and conversations not only made the work more enjoyable but also allowed us to easily exchange our strategies for dealing with various species and communicate effectively with one another to make our work more efficient. This internship allowed me to improve my ability to communicate with others making me a better co-worker and thus a better employee.