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## City of Bellingham Parks Volunteer Program Internship

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# COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



**Internship Title:** Environmental Restoration Internship - City of Bellingham Parks Volunteer Program

**Student Name:** Jordan Ng

**Internship Dates:** 9/23/22 - 3/10/23

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**STUDENT SIGNATURE** *Jordan Ng*

**DATE:** 3/13/2023

### Learning objectives

- Improve communication and leadership skills.
- Understand planning and execution of restoration projects.
- Learn how volunteer-focused projects are run and managed.

### Introduction

I began as an Environmental Restoration intern with the City of Bellingham's Parks Volunteer Program on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, and by the time of this writing will have completed this internship on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Being able to have the opportunity to be a part of this program was an invaluable experience, one that I have learned and grown much from.

The Parks Volunteer Program (PVP) operates within Parks and Recreation and is a public-facing municipal program that engages community members in environmental restoration and education. Throughout the year, regularly scheduled work parties are held, many of which are in partnership with other local environmental groups. Frequent community partners include the Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association (NSEA), Whatcom Million Trees Project (WMTP), and LEAD, an environmental restoration program at Western Washington University. Work done focuses on restoration, stewardship, and education directed towards local parks and green spaces. I was especially interested in this opportunity to see and participate in planning and execution of restoration efforts. Previously, my experience with ecological restoration was largely limited to work parties in my hometown, and so this would allow me to learn how ecological knowledge and collaboration with community partners would result in a coordinated, successful group

effort. Before this, my only knowledge or experience of the Parks Volunteer Program was from a work party at West Cemetery Creek on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021 where a large branch broke off a decaying tree onto the area where the planting demonstration had been completed just minutes ago.

### Job / Project

During the course of this internship, the main project I worked on was the preparation and leading small groups during work parties. On Fridays, we arrived at the Parks Operations office at 1:00 PM, conducting site visits for the location of the upcoming work party. There, we viewed site conditions, made note of any potential hazards, and would denote boundaries between zones designated per group, as well as introduce ourselves to community partners or other persons who we would be working with. The rest of the day would be focused on preparing tools and retrieving plants needed for the work party.

On Saturdays, we would meet at the Parks Operations office, typically between 7:00 to 7:30 AM to gather sign-in materials and travel to the work party location. In some instances, signs were set up along the way to the site, especially in less visible areas. After setting up tents, placing signs to guide volunteers, and staging tools, I found it especially useful to clip some examples of invasive plants that would be encountered, as well as similar native species. Volunteers were arranged into groups as they arrived. As a small group leader, I would welcome volunteers to the work party and after a brief overview of the site and important locations or hazards, I would go over identification of invasive and native species that we would be working with. After a short tool safety talk, volunteers

would begin action. For work parties with a planting goal, at a certain point in time I would ask volunteers if they would be interested in a planting demonstration. At some work parties, we would have plants be staged near the tools and picked out by volunteers, but at others – more frequently as we moved into the wintertime – plants were placed in optimal locations beforehand. While planting and until the end of the work party, mulch was laid around newly planted shrubs and trees, as well as over any bare grounds that had seen invasive plants removed. Work parties ended at noon, and after we collected our tools and materials, we would head back to the Parks Operations area. After a lunch break, tools, tents, and signs were put away. Tool cleaning was also required most weeks; in the fall, this was typically done by simply brushing away dust and mulch, but towards the rainier months in winter, this required washing, scrubbing, and in the case of hand tools, oiling. Afterwards, outreach materials and snacks were replenished in the office. When time was available, other tool maintenance and weeding plants in the nursery were other tasks that were given out.



*Figure 1: Truck with removed invasive plant material at Little Squaticum Park with tools in the foreground.*

Starting from December onwards, I joined AmeriCorps as a member with the Civic Leadership and Engagement Corps (CLEC). CLEC, formerly Washington Campus Compact, is a community service program through colleges and universities in Washington and Idaho. Focusing on several different areas of community service, the program through WWU is geared toward environmental stewardship of at-risk ecosystems and education. As an AmeriCorps member, I would have extra access to professional development and networking opportunities, as well as an educational award at the end of my term of service. This was especially of interest, as at a networking event in August, I was advised to take further studies in wetlands management.

During the winter months, I also began to arrive on Tuesdays for additional hours. Workload was set by available tasks; on one day, the other AmeriCorps interns and I arrived to attend a presentation by Annaliese Burns from Public Works and later help bring materials to a class for Park Ambassadors on pruning, and on another, snowier day, I helped reorganize trees in the nursery. On one such Tuesday, the other AmeriCorps interns and I joined one of the Parks staff in a class event at Bellingham High School. After telling the class about how he arrived at his position as an environmental educator, we assisted students as necessary in a native plant identification exercise.

#### Self - reflection

Being able to be a part of this team has been a truly invaluable experience, and I have thoroughly enjoyed learning about ecological restoration in practice. Now that I have seen how ecological restoration projects are done, I plan on continuing to be involved in organizations that focus on it, wherever that may be. An organization in my hometown carries out similar tasks, and it is fairly certain that when I return there, I will spend many Saturday mornings there. Having a visible effect on a place has proven to be satisfying beyond measure.



*Figure 2: Photo of me with a potato fork at Northridge Park.*

Interestingly enough, I found that I quite enjoy outdoor work and being able to impart knowledge about plants. For a long time, I was convinced that I did not enjoy the outdoors, especially during the winter, but I ended up being no more or less capable in conditions that dipped below freezing temperatures. I also found that I enjoy work that has a physical aspect. Being able to see oneself gradually getting stronger and building a greater endurance is something I enjoyed especially, and experiencing the elements and conditions outside – birdsong, wind, the texture of light throughout the day, prickles of mulch through your socks – is something that I would likely not be able to feel in an indoor setting. I have had previous plans of doing fieldwork or other sorts of data collection after graduating; this further reinforces that goal.



In consideration of my two main goals entering this experience, I would say that I have met them, but I see more clearly the ways in which I can improve further. Frequent practice at public speaking in a smaller, low-pressure environment lent me much, much more confidence at doing so, as well as having easily accessible ways of preparing to do so. The support provided by my coworkers in this was immense and I do not believe I would have been able to grow in this way without it. I would still not describe myself as a very confident, polished speaker yet, but I would like to get there in time.

In terms of further growth from here, I believe that improving my knowledge of GIS and statistics would be highly useful. In this area, I did not have to rely on that knowledge, but in the future when I may not be as able-bodied, that knowledge may be the most helpful for a career. While my career goals for the near future remain around fieldwork, it would certainly not hurt to plan forward.

In conjunction with the advice I received from the networking event in August, I had also taken the Environmental Impact Assessment class this winter. On the first day, the professor Leo Bodensteiner mentioned that being able to do this technical report-writing is frequently something that people working in the environmental sector may move towards later in their careers, once they may no longer be physically able to carry out field study.