Deception Pass State Park Intern

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Organization Worked For: Deception Pass State Park

Student Name: Sarah Archer

Internship Dates: 6/21/23 9/6/23

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STUDENT SIGNATURE: [Signature]

DATE: 9/7/23
Deception Pass State Park Beach Naturalist Internship

I spent my summer interning for Deception Pass State Park as a beach naturalist at Rosario Beach. Located in Island County, Deception Pass State Park is Washington’s most popular state park with over 3,000,000 visitors annually. Rosario Beach is located at the northern end of the State Park, on Fidalgo Island. The Rosario Beach tidepools, which my internship centered around, get tens of thousands of visitors every summer. The main purpose of my position at Rosario Beach this summer was to connect visitors’ experiences to the natural resource that the tidepools are and use environmental education as a means to protect it.

As a beach naturalist intern, I worked in three separate positions at Rosario beach, depending on the day and tidal conditions. The main position that I worked in was down in the tidepools. Here, I greeted visitors, giving them a brief introduction to what the tidepools were, what they could expect to find while exploring them, how to protect the tidepools, and why it was important to do so. I began my shifts down in the tidepools placing yellow rope and tidepool restoration signs around the exposed perimeter of the tidepools that connected to the rocky beach. This protected the area and guided visitors to an entrance where a more permanent yellow rope formed a trail for them to follow through the tidepools. I would also place orange cones along the yellow rope trail in the tidepools as I found and identified different creatures. These cones would have small signs attached to them stating the name of the creature along with a fun fact and an identifying photo. The cones, rope, and signs were temporary and removed at the end of each shift to keep them from washing away with the incoming tide. When not at the entrance greeting visitors, I did further interpretive work in the
tidepools by answering visitors’ questions, pointing out creatures and plants that were harder to find, sharing facts, and creating connections with visitors.

Figure 1. The entrance to the Rosario Beach tidepools.

On some weekend days I worked in the Discovery Center. The Discovery Center is housed in a building that was originally built as a bathroom by the Civilian Conservation Corp, which has now been repurposed into a learning and activity center. In the Discovery Center I, alongside another intern, would set up preserved specimens of different tidepool creatures as well as river otter and sea otter pelts and skulls. Visitors were allowed to touch and examine these specimens, facilitating an educational experience. Many visitors would inquire more about the specimens as they examined them. We also set up two crafts in the Discovery Center, where visitors could either make a paper-plate octopus or put together their own paper tidepool. This
was a popular activity for younger visitors and was a great opportunity to have discussions about sea creatures, tidepools, and the state park.

On weekdays where the tide didn’t get low enough to justify having someone doing interpretive work down in the tidepools, I ran the Education Table. This consisted of setting up a display of different preserved sea creatures, diagrams, and photos out on a picnic table above the beach. Visitors would stop by as they explored the beach, and I encouraged them to look at everything and ask me any questions they had about tidepool creatures, conservation, or the area. This position allowed me to assess my own learning throughout my time as an intern. On my first day running the Education Table I only set out six different creatures because those were the only ones that I could confidently teach others and answer questions about. By my last shift running it, I had a full spread of different creatures spread out and I was much more confident in my knowledge of all of them. The Education Table gave me the chance to become a stronger speaker and educator as almost every visitor had a question for me or wanted to learn more about something on the table. It was also a learning experience for me, as I encountered many visitors that were happy to share more fun facts and knowledge about the creatures and the area with me. This position allowed me to make the deepest connections with visitors, as I would usually have large gaps in visitors arriving, allowing the time for me to have long conversations.
I also had many opportunities to observe and participate in other roles while working with the state park. I shadowed one of the park’s AmeriCorps interpretive naturalist interns as she ran a Junior Ranger Program. The park ran multiple different programs throughout the week and this one focused on bees and their importance to nature as pollinators. During the program, visitors encouraged a bee to travel from flower to flower while learning about native seasonal flowers and then played a game that demonstrated pollen distribution with them taking on the role of the bee. Shadowing the junior ranger program was another thing during my internship that offered insight into what kind of professional work I could do in the future, and it was a great display of environmental education and its purpose. Another thing that I was able to participate in were tidepool tours. These were a new program offered at the park this summer and involved taking a group down to the tidepools and providing guided exploration. I first shadowed one being run by an AmeriCorps intern and then ran my own later in the summer.
Doing these tours gave me a new skill in terms of naturalist work and sharpened my public speaking skills.

Another unique experience that I had while working as an interpretive naturalist was the chance to educate others about a harbor seal pup. Harbor seal mothers often drop their young off on beaches like Rosario Beach while they feed, and the young rest while they wait to be picked back up. One pup turned up on the beach in an area that was easily accessible by visitors, so signage was placed out to encourage them to stay a safe distance away. A few of us interns also took turns staying down on the beach far enough away to keep the pup safe but close enough to stop any visitors from getting too close while also practicing some informal interpretation about harbor seal characteristics and habits.

Depending on the position that I was working in and the day of the week, I would have anywhere from 30 to over 200 guest interactions during a shift. There were many special moments like teaching visitors that had never seen the ocean before what barnacles were and how their body structures worked. I was also able to encourage younger visitors to get involved with the environment and to get them excited about their favorite sea animals. Every guest had a different goal in mind when visiting the tidepools. Some were there to learn, and others were there just to take in the sights. Part of my job was determining that from the visitors and offering an interaction that suited their goals and purpose for being in the park. This meant that I sometimes went over a chart of what they could find in the tidepools and where to find them, and other times it meant taking a photo for a visiting family with the tidepools in the background. My overall goal was to connect them to the resource in one way or another.
My learning goals for this internship were to learn about the inner workings of tidepool ecology, to develop greater familiarity with the species that inhabit Western Washington’s tidal areas, to learn about effective environmental education, and to figure out how to encourage individuals to get involved with both the environment and wildlife conservation. My work throughout the summer has allowed me to accomplish all these goals. Spending time in and around the Rosario tidepools gave me ample opportunity to learn about tidepool creatures solely through observation. I saw elongated aggregating anemones in the process of splitting, watched shore crabs get into scuffles and scavenge for their meals, and became acquainted with a great blue heron that frequented the tidepools, named ‘Glenn’ or ‘Gary’ by the volunteers, depending on who you asked. What I’d learned in my environmental science courses at WWU would often become of use alongside what I’d learned working for the park as I developed a better understanding of the area and connected it to my lessons in geology and ecology. Learning about how the tide changes in my classes turned into me explaining this to visitors while showing them how they could see where the previous high tide had reached along the beach. I would also frequently find myself in discussions with visitors about climate change and the impact it has on our planet’s natural resources.
My fellow interns, my supervisors, and the volunteers that I worked with were also a direct source of learning for me. Many of the park’s volunteers were individuals who were local to the area with years of experience, and every time that I worked with someone new, I learned another fact about the tidepools. One being that barnacles attach themselves to rocks with some of the world’s strongest natural material. The whole group of interns went through in-depth training with the parks’ naturalists at the beginning of the internship and it gave all of us a solid background on the area and its creatures. This training also gave us the chance to develop our soft skills and prepare us for the types of visitors we’d encounter and the best ways to engage with them meaningfully. Each of the positions that I worked in gave me opportunities to interact with visitors and develop stronger educational and interpersonal skills. I was also
able to learn more about the inner workings of Washington State Parks, especially interpretive programs, and this has given me the ability to consider what a career in the parks would be like.

Interning as a beach naturalist was an excellent experience and I would highly recommend it to other Environmental Science students at WWU. This position made it possible for me to connect what I’ve learned in my classes to hands-on experience while building up my professional and interpersonal skills. It’s also been a unique experience to work directly with the state park and to get to spend a summer outdoors in the tidepools.