Summer 2023

Kitsap County Parks and Rec Intern

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Internship Title: Maintenance & Operations Worker

Organization Worked For: Kitsap County Parks Department

Student Name: Aidan Jeffery

Internship Dates: 7/10/23 8/22/23

Faculty Advisor Name: Ed Weber

Department: ENVS

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STUDENT SIGNATURE: Aidan Jeffery

DATE: 8/22/23
6 Weeks at the Fairgrounds

Introduction

For this internship, I worked with the Kitsap County Parks Department from July 10, 2022 until August 22, 2022. The organization, as the name suggests, is in charge of operating and maintaining the parks within the jurisdiction of Kitsap County, which involves doing a variety of tasks such as preparing facilities for events, cutting back vegetation, cleaning the bathrooms, cleaning up litter, emptying trash bins, and many additional tasks. My internship position, officially known as “Maintenance and Operations Worker,” tasked me with performing any number of these tasks over the course of each 40-hour work week. Every work day at this internship was mostly spent working at the Kitsap County Fairgrounds preparing the site for the 100th annual County Fair, although the early hours of some days were spent doing tasks at other county parks in the Silverdale area.

The position put me in a spot in which I would be able to achieve my learning goals for the internship, which included learning about the tasks and skills required for maintaining public parks, many of which I described in the previous paragraph. In addition to that, it also allowed me to observe and learn about the environment and wildlife in Kitsap County and similar areas of western Washington, which was the other main learning objective of my internship. Over the course of my time as a maintenance and operations worker, I was able to apply several of the concepts I had learned in the Environmental Studies courses I had taken thus far, including how human activity impacts all aspects of the environment, the idea that wilderness and civilization are more intertwined than our collective understanding of the two may otherwise indicate, and how local ecosystems operate in any environment, including ones that appear to be artificial, or manmade. This not only included learning about the plants and animals that are native to Western Washington and the roles they play in the environment, as well as their respective tropic levels, but a large part of my work also involved learning about invasive species and the problems they pose to western Washington’s environment.

The third learning goal I hoped to achieve going into this position was learning the expectations that come with a position working in western Washington’s public parks. As previously mentioned, one of the main expectations is to maintain a healthy ecosystem in parts of
a park in which such a thing is needed, which usually comes in the form of removing invasive species. However, another key expectation in public parks is to keep it appealing enough for people to visit. Almost all of the tasks I performed in this position involved removing unwanted plants in order to make the area look less overgrown to visitors. The other main tasks, such as emptying trash cans and keeping bathrooms clean and functional, were also done to serve the purpose of maintaining the fairground’s clean appearance.

**Internship Activities**

I performed a wide variety of tasks and activities over the course of my internship, but there were several that I did more frequently than the others. The first of these was removing weeds from flower beds and other areas where they were unwelcome. These were removed in one of several ways. The first of these was the classic method: pulling them straight out of the ground. This was most commonly done with medium-sized weeds, such as dandelions and horsetail. The second method used was using a whopper, or hedge clippers, to cut the weeds at their base. The method was used for thick or thorny specimens, the most common of which was the Himalayan blackberry. For weeds that either grew in large clusters or were too cumbersome to pull out by hand, we would use a tool called a ‘hula hoe.’ This tool would be swung into the ground, which embedded the blade deeply enough to cut the plants by the roots when it was pulled towards the user. We most commonly used this tool to remove clusters of grass from the flower beds. Lastly, in areas bigger than flower beds that would otherwise take days to remove weeds by hand, we would use a weed eater to cut plants down. Some examples of places where these were used include the edges of baseball fields and parking lots.

For the last 3 weeks of the internship, I worked on a project in which all the vegetation along a 450-foot hillside was removed (with the exception of large trees) and replaced with a new cover of bark. This was along a stretch of road that led to one of the fairground’s parking lots. Many different tasks were done to carry out the project, though I only performed a handful of these. Tasks that my colleagues performed involved using an excavator to remove shrubbery and other thick vegetation, and using a bulldozer-like vehicle to scoop up bark out of a massive pile on the curb of the road and dump it in smaller piles on the hillside on which we were working. In between these tasks, I would use the whoppers to cut any remaining stems and roots that were still sticking out of the ground and rake leaves and other organic debris on the hillside.
into a pile, which would then be scooped into the back of a truck and dumped into a large pile elsewhere on the fairgrounds. After the bark was dumped, I would use the rake to spread out the bark in these smaller piles until it covered all of the hill’s soil. Once the work was completed, the leftovers from the bigger pile were cleaned up and moved elsewhere.

On a number of mornings, a coworker and I would do what we called “the rounds.” It involved visiting several smaller parks in the Silverdale area that were under the park department’s jurisdiction and emptying the trash bins in each park, and cleaning the bathrooms, if they were there. These sorts of tasks have a reputation as typically being dirty and undesirable in mainstream thought, and what we did definitely lives up to that expectation. Although the bathrooms were fairly clean on most days, I would occasionally see things that defied explanation. On several occasions, I walked into the stalls to do my usual cleaning only to find that someone had taken all of the toilet paper and stuffed it into the toilet bowl for seemingly no reason. Other times I saw things that would probably be better left undescribed, so I’ll just say that they made me appreciate the work that janitors do a lot more and leave it at that. As for emptying the trash, there’s not a lot that I can add. Some bins had a more pungent smell than others, but that’s to be expected when working with multiple bins.

Another task that I would do during these rounds that I haven’t mentioned yet was picking up after litterbugs. Every day we would do this, a variety of trash could be found on the ground. Candy wrappers, plastic bags, empty cans, you name it, it was there. However, the type of trash that was the most common by far was cigarette butts. I recall being baffled every day by how many smokers evidently didn’t know what a trash can was, and I still wonder if there’s a legitimate reason why they don’t put their waste in the trash can. Of course, one can say that about any trash on the ground, but cigarette butts stood out to me because there were so many of them.

Although the activities previously described made up the bulk of what I did, there were still a couple of additional tasks that I occasionally did during my time on the job. One day was spent raking branches and leaves that came from coworkers that were pruning trees and shrubs on the fairgrounds. Besides raking, this also involved piling them in the back of a small vehicle I drove on the fairgrounds called a ‘gator,’ and dumped them in the same spot where I would dump the weeds. Another activity I did was painting, which I did towards the end of the hillside
project. The curb at the base of the hillside was painted red to indicate that vehicles couldn’t park there, but by this point, a lot of the paint had faded or flaked off. The last day of the weeks-long hillside project was spent repainting the curb with a new, vibrant coat of red. There will likely be a number of other tasks that I will do during my remaining days on the job after the end of my internship hours, but the tasks described here were most of what I did over the course of my internship period, and it was from these tasks that I gained the bulk of my learning experience.

**Internship Achievements**

During the weeks in which I worked for the Kitsap County parks department, I learned a great deal about the topics I was hoping to learn about as outlined in my learning objectives. This included learning about the county parks, the work that goes into maintaining them, and all sorts of aspects of the environment and wildlife in Kitsap County and western Washington. There were also a number of things that I already knew about how wildlife impacts park infrastructure going into this internship, but it was through this opportunity that I was able to see the effects of wildlife on infrastructure firsthand. This included seeing how uncontrolled plant growth can damage roads and other structures. During the aforementioned hillside project, I made the observation that at most spots along the curb where large plants and shrubs grew, the concrete curb could be seen cracked wherever the roots of the plant could reach it, a result of the roots expanding as the plants grew.

As I previously described in the internship activities section, there was also a great deal I learned about what tasks and skills were required to maintain public parks like the county fairgrounds. I was already well aware that removing weeds was part of the list of tasks required to maintain any outdoor property, but what I wasn’t aware of was that it involved more than just pulling the weeds out by hand or cutting them en masse with a weed eater and that it sometimes required more hardy tools like the aforementioned hula hoe. I also underestimated the amount of time it would take to complete projects like the hillside transformation I worked on toward the end of my internship. From an outsider’s perspective, it seems relatively simple. Just remove some shrubs, dump some bark on the hill, and be done with it in about a week. But, like most things, it was easier said than done. The project involved a greater variety of labor-intensive tasks than I had previously imagined for such a project, to the point where it ended up taking three weeks to complete the project instead of one. From this newly found perspective, it makes
a bit more sense that projects notorious for taking longer than they seemingly should, like road
maintenance for example, require a lengthy period of time to complete.

Out of all the topics I learned about during my internship, the one that I learned the most
about was the wildlife and environment of the parks in Western Washington. With the help of my
supervisor, I was able to identify a lot of plant species, as well as which ones were native and
which were invasive. The bulk of this learning came from weeding the various flower beds found
throughout the fairgrounds. Most of the plants I removed were, unfortunately, invasive species.
Only two of the plant species I typically removed was one I could identify as a native species,
those being the horsetail plant and gooseneck moss. The most prominent invasive species I found
in the park was the Himalayan blackberry, a plant that produced edible berries but grew big
thorns on its stems that painfully prickly humans and animals alike. This plant also reproduced
and spread rapidly, completely covering at least one hill on the fairgrounds. Other notable
invasive plants I removed were the morning glory, a vine that wrapped itself around the stems of
other plants, the tangsy ragwort, and poison hemlock, which lethally poisoned any animals that
ate them. The most common invasive species that I was tasked with removing were the giant
knotweed, bighead knapweed, and common catsear, which were able to grow and reproduce at a
rapid pace and thrive in seemingly any part of the county. The impacts of sentient invasive
species could be seen, too. At least one tree I saw on the grounds had its upper leaves missing.
My supervisor pointed out that this was likely a result of an invasive insect that he referred to as
the “June beetle,” which feasts on the roots of the tree and causes a great deal of damage to the
specimen. The invasive species that threaten the wildlife of Western Washington, and the impacts
they have on native species were clear to see at the fairgrounds.

I also was able to connect my work and observations while on the job to some things I
learned in the classes I’ve taken at WWU so far. One example comes from removing large
clusters of weeds, which I connected to a Soil Landscapes class that I took during Spring 2023.
One thing that I learned in that class was that plant roots play a major role in keeping topsoil firm
and preventing erosion. I found that once the weeds were gone, the soil was much less firm and
easier to move around than it was when the weeds were present since the roots held the soil
together to the point where many plants couldn’t be removed without taking all the soil beneath
its roots with them. Additionally, one notable concept that I was introduced to in the ENVS 303
course that I took in Spring 2023 was the idea that the idea of wilderness and civilization being separate entities encroaching on one another was nothing more than a social construct and that these concepts are more intertwined than what our collective understanding of them may indicate. This idea was something that I witnessed firsthand while on the job. In one section of the fairgrounds containing a number of baseball fields, one of the spotlight towers had an osprey’s nest at the top. The structure seemed almost perfect for such birds of prey, as it gives them a good vantage point from which they can scout prey. On one particular day, I even saw the osprey swoop down from the air near the nest and catch what appeared to be a squirrel. In addition, several foreign plants that had clearly been planted by humans for decoration purposes, which we removed during the hillside renovation, contained small bird’s nests. Again, this works great for the birds, as the leaves above the nest were dense enough to shelter the birds from the elements and made it harder for predators to spot them. Thanks to this internship, I was able to see how civilization is more friendly to wilderness than our collective understanding of the two would otherwise have us believe, and how many species are able to congregate around artificial structures and form their own ecosystems in a populated area.

**Discussion and Evaluation**

After about 6 weeks of work, I’d say I’m proud of what I’ve been able to accomplish during my internship. During this time, not only was I able to accomplish my learning goals, but I played a big role in getting the Kitsap County Fairgrounds prepared for the 100th annual County fair. The hillside that my colleagues and I spent several weeks working on resides next to one of the main parking lots that attendees will use during the fair, and this area is a lot more aesthetically pleasing following the completion of the project. A lot of the flower beds are now weed-free, containing only the plants purposefully planted there by past staff, and patches of bare soil. As I write this, the final preparations for the fair are being made, with the rides and food stands at the carnival being brought in to be put together, and animal barns being prepared to show off the county’s most prized livestock and cherished pets. The work my colleagues and I have done over the past several weeks has ensured that the county fair will be able to begin on August 23, right on schedule.

I’m glad to say that the Kitsap County Parks Department has also been effective at providing us with the means needed to accomplish the tasks needed to prepare for the fair while
simultaneously treating us with the respect one would want at any workplace. Work-related expenses, such as gasoline for park vehicles, were reimbursed to me by the county. The tools I used for each task were kept in good condition and were quickly replaced in the uncommon occasions in which they broke. The pay I received (20.16 an hour) felt fair for the work I was doing. I was also given a generous amount of break time each shift, with a 45-minute lunch break as well as an additional two 15-minute breaks. The best thing that they provided by far was a flexible work schedule. The typical workday lasted from 6:00 am until 2:45 pm, but on days hotter than 80°F, we were given the option to work from 5:00 am until 1:45 pm if we so desired. That may seem undesirable on paper, and having to wake up at 4:00 am did indeed such, it was well worth it to avoid working during the hottest part of the day.

Most of the suggestions that I have for improvement come down to mere nitpicking. For example, the last week of my internship took place during a heat wave with temperatures reaching 90°F. The break room was supplied with refrigerated water bottles, which did help to cool us down, but I would have appreciated it if they also provided us with complimentary snacks fitting for such hot weather, like popsicles or ice cream sandwiches and the like. But again, this is largely nitpicking. Compared to my previous job during the summer of 2022, where I was doing similar work for the parks department of the city of Bainbridge Island, I received better treatment from my employers, given more generous breaks on the job, not to mention better pay.

As I previously alluded to, I was able to accomplish the learning goals that I hoped to achieve going into this internship. I hoped to learn more about the environment of western Washington and how it’s impacted by human activity. Through this internship, I was able to learn about native and invasive species that I wasn’t aware of prior to now, and how human activity is more beneficial to wildlife than I had previously thought. I also wanted to learn about the types of skills and work required to maintain local parks. I was able to learn firsthand what these required tasks were, what it felt like to do then, and now have some additional skills and experiences to add to my resumé. Lastly, I wanted to see how all of the learning outcomes I had previously described relate to what I have learned so far during my pursuit of a degree in Environmental Studies. During my internship, I connected a number of observations and experiences on the job to several key concepts I was taught in the classes I’ve taken so far,
ranging from social constructs of wilderness to aspects of soil affected by plants and human activity to witnessing the ecology of western Washington firsthand in a seemingly artificial environment. Overall, this internship enabled me to observe a lot of what I’ve learned at WWU firsthand as well as learn even more things that I hadn’t known previously. I can say that I also now have some more experiences that I can apply to future classes and skills I can apply to future jobs, a new entry to my work history, and some new connections that may come in handy the next time I go job hunting.

Acknowledgments

I would like to take a moment to thank all of the people who played a role in helping me be able to achieve these goals and experiences. First, I’d like to thank Ed Weber for helping me set up my internship goals, and for letting me enroll a little later than I had anticipated. I’d like to thank my supervisor, Jason Boddy, for being willing to take a chance on hiring me and for cooperating with WWU’s internship coordinators and aiding my progress in furthering the knowledge I hoped to gain from this internship. Lastly, I would like to thank the Kitsap County Parks Department and WWU for making all of these experiences possible. The classes I’ve taken at WWU, and the professors who taught them, boosted my interest in the environment and taught me some new ways to look at it, which I was able to apply in my experiences these past few weeks. The Kitsap County Parks Department also helped in this regard by placing me in an area perfect for observing the wildlife of western Washington and how they are impacted by human activity and invasive species. They also treated me with the dignity and respect that I was hoping to receive from an employer, and I am grateful to them for giving me the opportunity to learn what I could while working for the organization.