

Why I gave up on becoming a doctor to play in the dirt

Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge Manager Jennifer Owen-White's TEDx ABQWomen talk in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on May 28, 2015

We are doing a disservice to girls and young women by pushing them into careers in engineering and medicine.

Now don't get me wrong I think we certainly need more women in engineering, in medicine, in physics, in chemistry, microbiology, in all of the STEM (science technology engineering and math) fields.

But that's where I think we are misguided, because we are neglecting a crucial contingent of stem- one field that may have the greatest impact on our future and life on this planet- we need more women... in conservation

Conservation is the field that studies and engages in the protection, restoration and management, of wildlife and our critical natural resources such as forests, soil, and water.

Conservation is vital to our daily lives and the future of everything we depend on.

I submit to you that among STEM fields, conservation is Queen. (arms up)

In my years as a conservation scientist I have worked to engineer and restore wetlands, conducted wildlife population surveys and modeled population dynamics, identified thousands of vertebrate and invertebrate specimens in the stomach contents of frogs and calculated the statistical variance in the diets of frog populations from different regions, and always used technology to share the

wonders of the natural world far and wide in an effort to keep conservation relevant and engage new audiences.

Today I rely upon STEM regularly in my *dream job* as the refuge manager of the new Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge. As first urban refuge in the southwest right here in Albuquerque, Valle de Oro is a project meant to protect our natural and cultural resources and create a connected conservation constituency.

But I almost didn't make it here.

I was a young girl who had a passion for wildlife, I would spend all my free time catching snakes, frogs and bugs in the bayous of Houston- I was good at school and loved science- so to everyone around me that somehow meant I was supposed to grow up and be a doctor.

I was young, I wasn't confident in my voice and I let others write my story for me.

I went to college like I was supposed to and started pre-med. The science culture I was pushed into took place completely indoors in labs and offices, it was isolating and lonely and focused on minute details. I was miserable; I felt lost, confused and saw my confidence slip away.

As my senior year began, I was on the precipice of giving up and knew I had to make a change. Although I was a pre-med student by day, I spent all my free time hiking, watching wildlife, volunteering at a zoo, working at museums- the outdoors as my lab, sharing my passion with others and exploring ecosystems as a whole- something just didn't jive.

I thought my family and my teachers would be disappointed if I didn't want to be a doctor, disappointed that I was giving up on my "potential".

At the time, it was the most difficult decision I had ever been faced with. I was a young girl who only wanted the people in my life to be proud of me and I wanted to give up the one thing that I thought gave them so much pride.

I couldn't be a doctor, or a chemist or an engineer- I wanted to be a conservation biologist.

When choosing a career path we as women are faced with the almost impossible task of making the most of what our foremothers fought for, breaking boundaries for the next generation all while realizing a future that fulfills our needs. It is a career in conservation that allows us to balance these.

Conservation a field that is strong in STEM, a field that is less than 20% female, a field makes a difference in the world around us and fulfills a need to do good for our community and our planet.

So how do we get more young women in the field conservation?

Well here's how I'm trying to bring this into reality-these are the women of Valle de Oro NWR- (and no we don't have a calendar) In my job as the Refuge Manager of Valle de Oro, I have the incredible opportunity to mentor six amazing women finding their place in conservation work for wildlife and their community. Together we are a crew of 7 women 35 and under (can you guess who is the old lady of the team) starting a new national wildlife refuge that is changing the game for engaging urban people in conservation and gaining recognition on a national scale.

So, I don't have some magic solution to the question of how we get more women in conservation- the answer in my mind is we just do it, we show girls that have an interest in the outdoors at a young age that conservation is a viable career, that you don't have to give up your love of the environment to become a scientist- that there is a field of science where you can exercise your intelligence to serve your community and make an impact on our future.

The six women who work with me didn't come to me as biologists, they came to the refuge with degrees in English and literary arts, communications and urban planning – but we are all now conservationists.

So what can you do? I don't expect that you are going to take 6 young women under your wing to mentor them. But just take a second and remember back to when you were young- how many of you as a kid loved animals and the environment but then put that love on the backburner because you has to get a “real” job? What if someone told you that conservation IS a real job?!

What *you* can do is encourage the girls, young women and even young men in your life to stay true to their passion. If you find a young girl playing with worms in the mud, don't yell at her about getting her dress dirty, support her curiosity, ask her about her discovery, let her share the wonders of what she is learning, maybe take her to an urban national wildlife refuge to explore more. Tell her about a future in a career in conservation, or bring her to me and I'll tell her.

Because the bottom line is- women and the world are much better off when girls get dirty!