

In a world run by technology, escaping it has become a new adventure. The days of stamps and letters are nearly done; email is taking over. The days of simple locks are coming to an end; alarm systems are the new security. The days of exploring nature are declining; big screens and IMAX theaters can show us the good stuff. Stories of mountain men, who lived in the middle of nowhere, living off the land, have all but become urban legend.

Nowadays, it is inconceivable to go somewhere, even down the street, without a cell phone let alone a GPS. So how do we escape this firm grip technology has on us? Simply resorting back to nature is not enough, because even animals use technology. There are thousands, maybe millions, of animals worldwide that are equipped with radio tags or other tracking devices. Obviously this is not their own doing; but at any given moment, how close to you is the nearest piece of technology? Technology is not all bad; it is a key resource, there is no doubt about that. But there has to be some way to get our communities outside and exploring, while still keeping up to date with new technologies.

My name is Katie and I was given an amazing opportunity to participate in an internship with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Student Conservation Association (SCA) in the summer of 2011 at the Great Falls Discovery Center in Turners Falls, MA. The Discovery Center is the flagship visitors' center for the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge which encompasses the entire Connecticut River Watershed. The Conte refuge is unique because because 2.3 million people live within the 7.2 million acre refuge area. I grew up in South Hadley, which is within the Conte Refuge, and stayed there until college when I went to the University of Tampa to study Marine Biology. However, I always came back to western Massachusetts during school breaks.

Ever since I was in third grade when my class incubated chicken eggs and watched the chicks hatch, nature has always had a special place in my heart. The moment that newborn chick waddled into my hands (and pooped), I experienced the most innocent part of the circle of life. Over ten years later,

while doing shark research in Fiji, I witnessed first hand the most primal part of the circle of life: a shark feeding frenzy.

While working at the Discovery Center, my main responsibility was interpretation. Like most people, when I first heard this term, I thought I was supposed to be fluent in a foreign language. (I was kind of right, since nature is a foreign language to some.) To me, interpretation is an honest chat about nature. It is an opportunity to exchange knowledge so that each party can leave having learned something new. One thing that surprised me was that locals often came into the Discovery Center not knowing that they have been living in a National Fish and Wildlife Refuge their whole lives.

Through the effort of a co-worker, a grant was set up to get school groups to come to the Discovery Center a few times a week throughout May and part of June. Two major activities were set up for the students: a scavenger hunt and an interactive watershed table. The scavenger hunts include pictures of animals or plants that need to be connected with their habitat. The interactive watershed table shows kids how pollution that comes from many different places, such as farms, factories, construction sites, water treatment plants, and residential areas, gets into our streams and rivers, and eventually ends up in the ocean. Part of the appeal of this activity was the fact that kids were responsible for making it “rain” by using a spray bottle full of water, and watching how the “pesticides” (Kool-Aid) and “manure” (cocoa powder) traveled into the rivers and ocean.

Young children’s programs were probably my favorite, because oftentimes they had the most interest in the Discovery Center as a whole. I planned and ran the Second Saturday Children’s Series, Fourth Friday Young Children’s Story Hour, and on the fourth Saturday of every month, there is an Investigation Station set up at the front desk. The purpose of this is to help curious young kids get the courage to talk to an interpreter and learn cool facts while touching or feeling something. For example, one Investigation Station was on birds’ nests where different types of nests were available for kids to

look at and touch. Next to the real nests, materials were set out for kids to try and make their own nests, which turned out to be a lot harder than anyone thought.

Unfortunately, I could not spend my whole day talking to people, mostly because there was not a steady flow of visitors. So I had many other tasks to keep me busy: I was in charge of booking artists for the next couple of years to display their work in the Great Hall, I designed new bulletin boards for the hallway, I helped facilitate the beginning stages of a birding brochure that will hopefully be published soon, and I also helped to design new interpretive signs for outside the Discovery Center.

Although working in visitors' services was fun, being inside all day was tough; however, the fun parts of this job greatly outweighed the boring times, and at least now I know for sure I could not handle working in a cubicle all day every day. I was able to get out of the office a few times, which was a nice change of pace. One day, I participated in boat safety training with my co-worker, Amanda, and the local Youth Conservation Corp (YCC) crew. After that training, I was able to go to different sites along the Connecticut River and pull water chestnut, which is an invasive species. There was also a Pesty-Plant-Pulling Day, where volunteers helped up pull water chestnut in Barton Cove. There were not many plants to pull which was good news for the animals that live in that habitat, but our volunteers might have left slightly bored.

Another day, I went out on the Connecticut River again, but this time I helped to catch juvenile shad. The American shad populations in the Connecticut declined 1800's and 1900's due to overfishing, so efforts to restore the shad to vast numbers are on their way, and I was able to help. Speaking of fish, Family Fishing Day at the Discovery Center was a big success with a turnout of about 150 people! There were fly-tying instructions, fly casting instructions, regular casting instructions, two raffles, face painting, and the Watershed On Wheels Express (which is a mobile version of the Discovery Center). I was in charge of making sure people registered for the event, gave them free raffle tickets, and also gave them a map that I drew of the grounds so they would know where the activities were taking place.

Yet another out of office experience consisted of a few of the other interns and I taking a First Aid/CPR/AED certification class, something I have always wanted to do. Another day, I went to Parker River National Wildlife Refuge with an previous co-worker, Laurel, who was working on an urban education program. We took a behind the scenes tour of the refuge, where the public isn't allowed, and then explored the visitors' center. It was very interesting to see how different problems can be at refuges within the same state.

The busiest days at the Discovery Center were when there were live animal programs. Kids get very excited to be able to get so close to an animal they may have never seen before. For example, the Boston Science Museum brought reptiles, including a tortoise, snake, and even a young alligator. Needless to say, the children (and some adults) were enchanted.

My organization skills really came in handy this summer. The Discovery Center has a closet in the Great Hall that contains bins with craft materials, fact sheets, fish tank supplies, and so much more. One of my jobs was to attempt to clean and organize the closet. It was pointed out to me by my supervisor that I am task oriented and I like having a to-do list and then crossing things off as I finish them, such as cleaning the Great Hall closet. This internship has also helped me to gain more confidence in talking to people I do not know and understanding the power of a smile.

I always knew I adapted well to any situation, but I'm even more prepared now. SCA threw us into the unknown to see if we could keep our heads above water; however, it was always understood that mentors would be available 24/7 if we ran into difficulties. Working with the SCA and USFWS was like joining a family. There was always someone checking up on me to see how my experience was going and if they could help in any way. One of the main points that was drilled into my head at the SCA orientation was to get out of my comfort zone. Although uncertainty makes us vulnerable to embarrassment, it gives us the opportunity to try something completely new.

This summer has really ignited in me a desire to teach, preferably elementary school. Watching kids' faces as they make a connection or finally understand a point is a great moment. Children have an inherent love of nature, and to be able to help foster that love would be an amazingly rewarding experience. Working with younger kids and seeing how excited they get about a subject I love makes teaching all the more fun. Also, by making lesson plans, I learned more about different subjects, too. For example, did you know spiders have 48 knees? Or that a cow's sweat glands are in its nose?

This summer has not only increased my love for nature and environmental education, but also made realize that I no longer want to live in a city like Tampa. I am much better suited for a mountainous and riverine landscape, similar to that of my home town of South Hadley. I also have a renewed confidence that the issue of conservation will continue to reach the public, and that other students like myself, will truly be able to make a difference, now and in the future.

I leave work every day having learned something new; it is truly a great feeling. Summer was not long enough to do everything I wanted to do, such as seeing the birding brochure finished, the new bulletin boards go up, or new interpretive signs being made, but my outlook is definitely more optimistic for conservation and my own future career after this experience. I improved my networking skills and learned to how to make connections with people so that they will have a better chance at remembering me.

I would be honored to work with the USFWS in the future. Every time I have worked with them so far, I have had an amazing experience and the people who already work for them are so helpful in getting interns future internships or jobs. I credit the USFWS with my first paycheck and first long-term hands-on experience with a sampling of careers I would like to pursue in the future. Most people have a poor view of government jobs, but I am not worried. I am excited to travel all over the country, work with new people, learn about different habitats and environments, try to help animals that need it, and hopefully inspire others to help as well. One student even told me he was going to take my job in a few

years. Future conservationists have a lot of challenges to look forward to: animals are adapting to the changing climate, new species are still being discovered, the human population is continuously expanding in number and area of land inhabited, and so much more. These challenges should sound exciting, not daunting.

The splendor of the future is never knowing what is next, but I can hope that I will be living in a place where nature is even more appreciated and protected than it is now. The main purpose for Silvio O. Conte, a congressman from Massachusetts in the 1990's, to want to designate the Connecticut River Watershed as a refuge, was to make the river swimmable and fishable for his grandchildren and their children. I have a similar vision. I hope to live in a world where people do not have to worry about depleting natural resources, because they are being used sustainably. I hope to have a job that I love and that makes a difference in other people's lives. I hope to travel all over this beautiful country and visit as many refuges as possible. Most importantly, I hope that people get up, go outside, and spend some time exploring this beautiful biological world that I am devoting my life to, because there is so much to see, so much to do, and so much more to learn.