

From Basket Maker to Beltway Shaker

Fishery Biologist—Cecilia Lewis

By David Klinger



Figure 1. Cecilia Lewis knows from experience that people and natural resources are woven together.

In popular college vernacular, “basket weaving” is considered a metaphor for an easy course. It’s not that easy in Washington, where the intricacies of government really do touch people’s lives.

And in the case of Cecilia Lewis – barely three months into her new career as a fishery biologist in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Division of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Conservation – the literal weaving of baskets imparted a unique and valuable perspective that will serve her well as a budding young biologist.

For the self-described “normal, rural kid from Effingham, South Carolina,” baskets have proven an interesting dimension in her preparation for a life’s work, still very much in its formative stage for the 27-year-old Lewis.

Baskets – and the cottage industry spawned by the native sweetgrass of South Carolina’s “low country” – formed the focus of her work for the U.S. Forest Service’s Center for Forested Wetlands Research in Charleston before she entered graduate school and arrived at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service earlier this year. The marine plant was first gathered by African slaves and fashioned into simple, but highlyprized, bowls and baskets that their descendants, most of them women, still sell by the roadside to beachgoers along coastal U.S. Highway 17.

Lewis’s oral histories with local basket weavers about the abundance and decline of the economically valuable grass – now disappearing, in part to development – imparted a depth of understanding about the interdependence between people and resources that ought to serve Lewis well in the Fisheries Program. Humans and fish are economically and culturally as intertwined as the craft culture that the sweetgrass has sustained for generations.

“This was my first experience in exploring the human dimensions of scientific research,” says Lewis. “I enjoyed it, and found that you really need to take the time to build relationships and sensitivity to cultures before you can get information. Organisms you are sampling don’t talk back, so communication (with people) is what’s important.”

To view the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through the fresh eyes of a Cecilia Lewis is to imagine a future of boundless career opportunities ... a promising young person whose most significant marks in life have yet to be made, a career that is, as yet, largely an unpainted canvas.

Life for small-town Lewis in Washington is now an exciting – and occasionally perplexing – world of apartment living and Metro commutes, traffic gridlock and downtown bustle – a world away from Effingham, South Carolina, where “a big thing was when our road got paved.” It’s been a challenge, she says, to “stay grounded ... and when you meet good people, you hang onto them.”

“In the short time I’ve been here, I know the tasks I’m doing are valued, but I’m not sure I’d be completely missed if I disappeared today,” she says. “But, with time, I will leave my mark.”

Her new job is an introductory smorgasbord of entry-level tasks that support a field network of Fish and Wildlife Conservation Offices, ranging from preparing 2011 fiscal year budget justifications to researching questions on airborne hunting to tracking population data on trust species like salmon. “I’m doing a little bit of everything, giving me a broader overview of how the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works with others.

“It’s a bit intimidating, seeing how your work goes through many hands and many edits. You’ve got to just feel your way through ... and ask really good questions,” says Lewis.

Her interest in conservation, Lewis admits, stems not from any rural childhood immersion in the out-of-doors or hunting and fishing, but from the educational programming she encountered on public television. In much the same way as marine biologist Rachel Carson (who never glimpsed the ocean until she reached graduate school) Lewis says, “I was hooked. I didn’t spend much time on the coast while growing up, but aquatic habitats and aquatic species just intrigued me.”

That vicarious interest led her to a B.S. in marine biology at the College of Charleston in 2004, followed by concentrated coursework in marine science at Western Washington University’s Shannon Point Marine Center in northern Puget Sound. She entered the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service via its “Student Career Experience Program,” while completing her M.S. at Michigan State University this past spring. “I turned in my thesis on a Friday, started working here on a Monday,” says Lewis.

“I’m fascinated by the ‘big picture’ issues in Washington, and how they trickle down to state and local governments ... how sound policies make a difference locally. Having worked for the South Carolina DNR, I’ve seen how federal rules and regulations can affect local areas. Maybe I can help close that gap between what happens nationally and what occurs in the field.”

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