

This summer, I had the opportunity to intern at Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium in Sarasota, Florida. Despite its small size, Mote is consistently ranked as one of the top aquariums in the country due to its focus on visitor education, community involvement, and research. I love aquariums as much as the next person, but it was Mote's expansive research programs that led me to intern among some of the leading scientists in marine biology today. Specifically, I worked in the Manatee Research Program (MRP) with four Mote biologists, and among them was senior scientist Dr. John Reynolds who literally wrote the book on manatee research and conservation. The primary research of the MRP is photo identification of the Florida manatee *Trichechus manatus latirostris*.

Photo identification is important for the research and conservation of Florida manatees because the documentation of individuals over a long period of time enables us to compile life histories for these animals. This information can be used to track and calculate reproductive rates, survival rates, seasonal movement patterns, and site fidelity of warm water refuges. Due to the frequency of boat strikes and collisions with these shallow water inhabitants, most manatees bear scars or mutilations caused by the propeller of a boat engine. We use the distinct patterns of scars, markings, and tail mutilations to identify individual manatees. Organizations throughout Florida have been using photo identification techniques since the 1970's and have established a joint statewide database of known individuals.

As an MRP intern, my responsibilities included assisting with all aspects of data collection, entry, and processing for photo identification. Once a week, we go into the field for data collection. Fieldwork consists of surveying Sarasota Bay from a boat or airplane in order to get an accurate count of manatee populations and obtain photos of individuals when opportune. Typically on field days, someone from the program will be a passenger in a small airplane while the rest of the staff is on the boat. The person doing the aerial survey will fly over all of the waterways in Sarasota County to obtain an updated count of all Florida manatees, while directing staff in the boat where groups of manatees are present in Sarasota bay. This is called an Aerial Directed Boat Survey. Meanwhile, staff on the boat will go to the locations identified by the aerial survey and take photos of manatees that are present.

After a day in the field, the rest of the week is focused on entering all of the collected data into the MRP's many databases. Typical information recorded in company of the photos taken would be environmental data such as salinity, air and water temperature, wind, and Beaufort scale, as well as sex, presence of calves, habitat type, and exhibited behaviors during the sighting. Pictures taken in the field have to be processed and organized with image management software. All of this kept me very busy in the office.

In addition to data collection and entry, I had many other miscellaneous tasks dealing with equipment and boat maintenance. I also had specific intern projects to work on during my time at Mote, including land surveys and boater compliance

surveys for the City Island Grass Flat habitat immediately surrounding Mote's campus. I loved getting to work as part of a team and I became very close with the staff and the other intern in the Manatee Research Program. One of the things I appreciate the most about my internship at Mote was the opportunity to shadow and work with other research programs during the summer. So, not only did I get to learn new field methods and research skills relating to manatee research, but I also got to experience research methods for working with sharks, sea turtles, and dolphins during my internship.

I don't know if I had one greatest "lesson learned" during my internship, but I definitely got some much needed "real world" experience in renting a house, budgeting, working a strict nine to five job, and adjusting to living in a new city on my own. This internship definitely reinforced the need for a strong work ethic as that which I employ at Sewanee. The most important thing I will take away from this summer is that I truly have to work to discover what I want to do with my life after graduation. I came into this summer with the mindset that I was getting to work my dream job for a short time, but after spending almost every day staring at a computer screen, I realized that this might not be the job for me.

However, I have discovered through my experience with the Manatee Research Program that I am searching for a more active or "hands-on" form of research than would be available to me with photo identification. Although it has long been my dream to work with manatees in any capacity, the passive nature of this research is not what I am searching for. With that in mind, and through talking

with the staff at Mote, I have decided to go to graduate school after Sewanee. I am so thankful for all of the experiences I have had, but especially for the connections I have made along the way.