

This summer, I was employed as a forest management intern by the U.S. Forest Service. I worked at the Nantahala National Forest, in the far southwestern tip of the state of North Carolina. The Nantahala National Forest is comprised of over 525,000 acres of mixed pine-hardwood forest in the southern Appalachians Mountains. The Forest was established by an act of Congress in 1920, and as with many National Forests in the eastern United States, it is a patchwork of tracts of land that the government bought from private owners at the start of the 20th century. Broadly, the Forest owns the mountainous ridge-tops while the lower river valleys, where the towns are, are privately owned. The Forest is split into three Ranger Districts: The Tusquitee, the Cheoah, and the Nantahala. These names come from the Cherokee language; an hour north there is a reservation of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation, the descendants of families who escaped the Trail of Tears by hiding in the mountains. I worked primarily on the Tusquitee Ranger District, which is headquartered in the town of Murphy, North Carolina. My internship coordinator, Steverson Moffat C'86, is the NEPA compliance officer for the Forest, and his office is in Murphy. NEPA stands for National Environmental Policy Act, a 1907 federal law that mandates that the government must assess, and if necessary, mitigate, the environmental effects of any project it undertakes. What this means for a National Forest is that any time it wants to conduct a timber sale or build a road or a boat launch on a lake, for example, it must comprehensively analyze the consequences of that action on local soil and water quality, on the area's aesthetic and archaeological value, and on other aspects of environmental integrity.

My duties were mostly related to NEPA compliance, and were split between work in the field and work in the office. In the field, I assisted scientists as they performed surveys to assess the value of proposed project sites as it related to their specific fields (fisheries biology, wildlife

biology, botany, archaeology, etc). If the botanist, for example, found a rare species of moss on a site proposed for a timber sale, she would report it to Steverson, who would include it in his environmental assessment, and the timber sale would be altered so as not to damage the moss. This meant searching for salamanders with headlamps at 2 a.m., going electrofishing in mountain streams, digging shovel tests on Cherokee tool-making sites, and a few other fun activities in beautiful places. Field work usually consisted of a long drive to a remote area, some sweaty work doing something totally new to me, and a long drive home. These days were challenging learning opportunities, and they usually got me ready for a day of air-conditioned office work.

My office work included drafting scoping letters, which are brief preliminary notices of a proposed project that go out to advocacy groups and interested members of the public prior to a comment period. Concerned parties can then object if they don't like a project. My big project, though, was a report summarizing a Transportation Analysis Process that the Forest is under-going. For budgetary reasons, the Forest is decommissioning some of the hundreds of miles of roads that it has built in the last century, and I was assigned the job of figuring out the levels at which the forest's roads were maintained, how much that maintenance cost, and what new configuration of maintenance levels would save the forest the most money while still providing for public access needs. This was not an interesting project to me, but it raised my comfort level with huge volumes of Excel data and long boilerplate documents. The report will come out to 40 or so pages, and though the decision about operational changes to the road system lies ultimately with the District Ranger, much of the final report will have been my work. It is satisfying to have a tangible project almost completed that is a product of my internship.

I learned a great deal from this internship. I have discovered what I want to do to make a living, I have learned how the Forest Service does and does not align with my goals, and finally I have become familiar with a part of the country that was totally new to me, which is something I count as very valuable. On a personal level, I got to practice maintaining an even keel through the dips and swells of everyday adult life. This is a skill that adults may take for granted, but for me it was new and often difficult. Finding a place to live, cooking for myself, living by myself in a place where I didn't know my way around and where I didn't have any friends, was hard. On July 3, my mom died, and I had to go home for a week and a half. This traumatic event disrupted whatever routine I had built for myself at the beginning of the summer, and obviously it made for a sad and lonely last few weeks of work. It was important to me to finish what I had started, and I am glad I returned to work, but it has been a struggle and I am eager to return to school.

In terms of the work itself, I learned that while living in a beautiful place and working in the woods sounds great on paper, in reality my job was enmeshed in paperwork and bureaucracy. I learned that many of the ingredients surrounding a job can line up and make the work sound ideal, but that if you do not find fulfillment doing the work itself, then it is not the right job. With this in mind, I have realized that I owe it to myself to pursue a career that allows me to read and write for a living. I am an English major and a born bookworm, and I have always liked the idea of being a journalist. But the path into a career as a successful writer of long-form narrative nonfiction is not a clear one, and for this reason I had drifted towards forestry as a potential means of capitalizing on my love of the outdoors. I realize now that though pursuing journalism means an uncertain future, it is preferable to a job in which I do not feel I am producing anything of value. Though I worked with good people and enjoyed getting to know western North

Carolina, I do not think I want to spend a career drafting legal justifications for construction projects, or even managing a section of a forest as a District Ranger. My contact with people who work these jobs taught me a lot about the Forest Service: a little of forestry, a lot more of emails and acronyms.

Still, an internship that teaches you what you don't want to do is valuable, and I am glad to have had it. I am grateful to Steverson Moffat for coordinating the internship, to Sewanee's Career and Leadership Development office for helping me get the internship, and to the donors whose contributions allowed me to support myself while doing the internship.