

**Mustang Island Environmental Education Internship**  
**Amanda Liford, Summer 2016**

I spent this summer working for Mustang Island Conference Center, located on a barrier island off the coast of Texas near Corpus Christi. Another Sewanee intern (Maria Baker, C'18) and I served as regular staff members, as well as environmental educators for the conference center's family camp. Family camp begins on Thursday and ends on Sunday and involves beach time, pirate treasure hunts, bonfires & s'mores, as well as worship and Eucharist in the Episcopal tradition. Normal camp tasks including working a shift in the kitchen, beach duty giving surf lessons and entertaining kids, beach setup, assisting with all activities listed above, and leading other sessions such as youth night. Family camp has an overall feeling of fellowship, joy, and relaxation, and the campers of all ages are normally very happy, wonderful people. All of this makes it a wonderful environment to work in.

For the camp portion of my environmental education duties, Maria and I worked together on all of our tasks. We implemented environmental hour on Fridays and Saturdays. During this hour on Fridays, we planned an activity on the beach, either beach cleanup or food web freeze tag, an ecological twist on your normal freeze tag with hunters, predators, and decomposers. On Saturdays, we had an indoor activity in the conference center, sometimes using a competitive "feeding frenzy" game illustrating how hard it is for animals to decide what's good to eat when plastic ends up in the ocean, sometimes using paint chips to show the zones of the ocean, and sometimes using a ball of yarn to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the food web and how the death of one species can affect the whole chain. This portion of the internship was a bit difficult to accomplish. All scheduled events at family camp are optional, so kids weren't required to come learn about the environment, and many didn't particularly want to "study" on

their summer off. From that experience, I learned how to get kids interested in things they normally would turn down, and how to hold their attention. Sometimes I failed, but the kids who did get something from the activities made everything worth it. In addition to these activities, I also maintained a touch tank at the beach where families could find and deposit sea life and Maria and I would attempt to learn as much as possible about native animals in order to answer any questions they may have. It was a wonderful way to interact with families as well as learn about a whole new environment.

I volunteered at the University of Texas Marine Science Institute in the education department as well as in the Animal Rehabilitation Keep. For UTMSI, Maria and I took turns leading the Wetlands Education Center tour, which is focused on the local estuaries and environments and includes information on the salt marsh, sand dunes, and barrier islands. Leading this tour gave me a new confidence with public speaking and was always a highlight of my week. I loved interacting with guests and answering their questions, as well as seeing how engaged and interested the people were. I also helped lead the film discovery series where we screened a movie or clip centered on an environmental theme and then led an activity based on that theme. For instance, one day we talked about plankton and showed a film on it, then showed guests how to shake bottles full of phytoplankton, causing them to light up with bioluminescence.

The ARK (Animal Rehabilitation Keep) at UTMSI was one of my favorite parts of the summer. In the ARK, I helped care for injured birds, tortoises, and sea turtles. I learned how to hold a duck properly, what pelicans eat, how to feed a baby sea turtle or baby bird with tweezers, and how to gut a rat (food for raptors). The best part was interacting with the animals in such a close and personal way. I recognized animals from one week to the next and tracked their

process. Sometimes I would come back in to find a bird gone, either released or unfortunately dead. One of my hardest days at the ARK was when two great blue herons had to be euthanized on the same day. However, the work was so rewarding, and to see animals improving was a joy.

There are a few caveats and considerations to keep in mind before committing to this internship. In the description for this job, it is mentioned that there is an established research relationship between the conference center and research facilities in the area. The most that I was given was a list of contacts, all of which declined help or said it was too late to get in to their labs. As far as I know, no Sewanee interns in the past few years have been able to perform research because of this lack of connection. I accepted this internship in the anticipation that I would get research experience at some of the research facilities for marine science, which was not the case. In the future, if a research relationship can't be actually established, it would help a lot if the list were sent out sooner, like as soon as the applicant accepts the job offer.

There was also little to no guidance for environmental activities, and any work performed for environmental education was done in my free time. No compensation for extra work or extra time to prepare the environmental activities was provided, so near the end of the summer, it tended to feel like an extra burden since I was a regular staff member who performed all staff duties, plus environmental education for camp and volunteering at UTMSI on days off. For these reasons, it was almost impossible not to burnout or resent the internship portion for piling on more work without taking away any other responsibilities. One last note of caution: this job is a far cry from easy, especially for an even slightly introverted person. From Thursday to Sunday, from around 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. (sometimes later, sometimes earlier), staff has to be "on" for the families, constantly interacting with kids and parents, and never resting except for a one-hour break (meals are taken with families and staff is expected to facilitate conversation).

All in all, I received valuable experience from UTMSI, and met wonderful people through family camp and environmental education. I can say without a doubt that I've never been a part of a staff as supportive or close as the staff at Mustang Island was, and that made all the difference in this internship. I was able to test my skills with environmental education, and discovered that I'm more comfortable in a tour guide position than with a small group or one-on-one position with kids. I learned what is important to me in a job and what I should probably avoid. I learned that when in a situation that is very far from the expected, to try and make it better rather than sulking about misconceptions. Perhaps most importantly, I learned to push myself socially out of my comfort zone and as a result had many enlightening conversations and met some wonderful people. I've never worked so hard at a job, but when I look back on my summer, I will remember the connections I made at Mustang Island, the amazing experiences I had working at UTMSI, and the way a family camp made me grow as a person more than I ever would have thought possible.