The Nature Conservancy is one of the leading conservation organizations working in areas around the world to “protect the lands and waters on which all life depends”. The Conservancy has been in operation for 64 years, working in 69 countries across the world. To date, the Conservancy and its one million members have conserved 120 million acres of land. The global challenges of The Nature Conservancy are climate change, freshwater, oceans, and conservation of critical lands. In facing these challenges, TNC has over 600 scientists who explore the issues facing our planet.

Each of the 50 states has a chapter of TNC. This summer, I interned for The Nature Conservancy in Alabama as the Government Relations Intern. TNC of Alabama is working to protect the 70% of Alabama lands covered in forests along with the 18 river systems flowing through the state. The main chapter in Alabama is located in Birmingham, while a coastal chapter is located in Mobile. I was fortunate this summer to experience both offices within the chapter. I primarily worked in Birmingham under the guidance of Kellyn Garrison, the head of external affairs and government relations for Alabama.

I am double majoring in Economics and Environment and Sustainability and have the hopes of aiding the process of making environmental initiatives more economically feasible. As an Alabama native, I never fully grasped the rich diversity found in the lands and waters of my home state. This summer awakened me to the change needed in Alabama and the country to protect the lands on which we all depend. My work this summer focused on water policy research, urban environmental planning, marketing, the Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster, living shorelines and climate change. Along with research and field work, I also participated in a
conference at the new NOAA Water Center in Tuscaloosa, as well as a board meeting to see the interworking of a non-profit organization.

Although my internship covered many topics, it enabled me to realize the magnitude of problems facing environmental policy within the state. Throughout my internship, there was a focus on water in and around Alabama, mostly in regards to the deficits in water policy for the state. Alabama is a common law state with no comprehensive water management plan. In 2013, the Alabama Water Agencies Working Group completed a report of the state of water management in Alabama. In order to develop a sustainable water management plan for Alabama, “Focus Area Panels” were created to discuss core water resource issue areas. The Nature Conservancy of Alabama has associates on many of these panels. I was able to work closely with Ms. Garrison to review the water management techniques needed to preserve the waters in our state. This was very insightful for me, as I did not realize how little Alabama has in the form of policy regarding water. Although nearly 10% of the nation’s freshwater flows through Alabama, it is not being treated as a valuable resource.

Another focus of my eight week internship was climate change. I have always been an advocate for policy encouraging change in our dirty energy sector; however, this summer I was able to research carbon sequestration and carbon credits as a way of offsetting carbon emissions along with conservation of lands within Alabama. Much of my study concentrated on the longleaf pine in Alabama. The longleaf pine species range originally stretched from southern Virginia to Texas. The longleaf pine was slowly decimated by over harvesting, the lack of fire, and the fast growth of modern pine plantations. Currently, there are many efforts to reestablish the lost longleaf pine acres across their original habitat. Alabama is home to part of the longleaf
pine whole system. After researching the longleaf pine as a tree, I was then able to find ways that the longleaf pine lands could bring income and help the economy of the state. A possible solution to reforestation of the longleaf pine in the future may be carbon sequestration in the trees. By sequestering the carbon in the conserved lands, large corporations like Disney World can purchase the carbon credits for this land to offset the carbon they emit. Although this does not solve carbon emissions completely, it is a way for two different worlds to come together and exact change. Conservation and big business become interdependent in this model. This is a perfect example of how environmental efforts need an economic incentive. Our capitalist financial system is concerned with making and sustaining money; therefore, it is pertinent that environmental efforts also have an economically-pleasing incentive.

During my time at TNC, I gained knowledge on how a non-profit works. Each of the people I have encountered who work for TNC wants a better future for the earth and its people. Previous to working for The Nature Conservancy, I thought I may want to attend law school; however, I am not so certain of that anymore. I have become deeply intrigued with climate change and resurrecting change in that area. Approximately one-third of my internship was spent researching carbon emissions and what the world is doing to combat the grave consequences we have bestowed upon the earth. My research areas for the future will concern climate change and the issues surrounding this environmental problem.

My time here at TNC has placed my Economics and Environment and Sustainability majors in a better perspective. Previous to this internship, I took the class “Environmental Economics” which helped begin my interest into the intricacies between the two. This summer, I have applied material I learned in class to the actual practices in the real world to significantly
increase my knowledge about both majors; however, this internship will jumpstart my knowledge base in the policy classes required for my Environment and Sustainability major. This internship has solidified my hopes of attending graduate school and earning a master’s degree in the environmental economics field. This summer, I learned so much more about my home state than I ever thought possible. It gave me hope for the future of Alabama and instilled in me the want to move back to Alabama and resurrect environmental change.