Summer Internship Report 2017

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Hometown: Rising Fawn, Georgia

Ecology Research Assistantship:
Environmental Impact of Recreational Rock Climbing
Tennessee & Colorado

Provide an overview of the organization/research project and a summary of your responsibilities, tasks, and/or projects.

We conducted interviews as part of an environmental impact study of rock climbing that we'll be continuing on and around campus for at least the rest of the year. The interviews were an attempt to identify the relationship between the rock climbing community and the environment they come in contact with and care about. Our responsibilities were to get as many interviews as possible, so we had to be in the right place at the right time and approach people as effectively as possible without being intrusive to get them to talk to us. Then we just directed them through a series of questions while we wrote down their responses in shorthand on a form we created.

During your internship, what did you accomplish or how did you make a difference? In what ways did you grow in your professional and technical skills?

As with any research project conducted in the field, our trip was fraught with challenges, such as getting lost about every other day, so that we collected as much data as we did feels like a huge accomplishment. We still have to analyze all of it to know exactly what we got from all of the interviews, but from the goals that we set at the beginning, the project was a success. Again, the data collection is only a small piece of the study that we eventually intend to publish, which will hopefully make a difference in the management of climbing areas and the education of the climbing community. However, every person we talked to was made aware of our purpose in conducting the interviews and had to think critically about all of their views on the subject, which we assume in most cases will cause the participants to be more conscious of environmental issues facing the climbing community and their role in it specifically. That was particularly satisfying for me while we were conducting the interviews. My communications skills must have benefitted from starting from no relationship to having an interesting in-depth discussion with over 70 people in about a week.

Describe a problem that you helped to solve at your internship. What skills or knowledge from your education at Sewanee helped you address the problem?
Because of the time constraints for both my partner and me of the summer schedule, the first two weeks in August were the only available options for this project and in the South, these are some of the worst weeks of climbing all year. We decided to just deal with it when we were planning the trip in February. Our itinerary kept us in the South, only getting as far away from Sewanee as southern KY.

On the first day of our trip, starting several days after the project formally began with some data collection in Chattanooga, we were traveling toward the red River Gorge where we intended to stay for the whole next week. We stopped at another climbing area that was on our way, and despite being a Saturday and a very popular area, there were so few climbers there that we worried we wouldn't be able to find anybody to interview during the week. Within an hour or so, we changed our plan completely, realizing that if we wanted to find high densities of climbers, we would need to go north and west. We called our faculty advisor from a church parking lot in middle Tennessee and explained it to him and then immediately changed course to Denver, Colorado, driving through the night to get there the next morning. We couldn't have done that without a lot of flexibility and our research benefitted from that.

**In what way were your teamwork skills strengthened?**

In addition to conducting interviews and negotiating travel, Erika and I were climbing together, so we were regularly trusting our lives to each other every day of the trip. That's one of the things I value about climbing. I can't help but think that this made us better able to work as a team during the research and it also made our participants more trusting of us as we climbed near them before our "interrogations," which could have easily put a lot of people on edge. We also got stuck in the mud on a slope one morning and had to jog four miles and borrow a jeep and then drive back and tow it out ourselves. Because we were able to communicate well, we could understand each other's goals and, even when they differed, we could keep the whole show on track.

**How did your internship affect your career plans?**

It wasn't that much experience in a career way or at least not from my perspective. I've known I enjoy doing research, especially in the field, and I plan on making that a part of my eventual career. It also made me look at travel in a different way, and that'll probably play a larger role not just in my career but life in general.

**In what ways did your internship cause you to encounter people of different backgrounds from your own? What steps did you take to communicate effectively with such persons? What did you learn from such persons' perspectives?**

We were forced to give more of our own story in the interviews than we might have expected at the beginning. Obviously we couldn't tamper with their knowledge by providing them with our own, but personal information came out in the questioning in varied and subtle ways. Because there were limitations to the kind of information we could accept in the surveys, the discussions often continued after the questions were complete and we learned all sorts of things from people around the country, but also from several other countries like Singapore and Brazil.

**Words of advice for future interns (housing, transportation, etc.)?**

If you can fit it in, take a spontaneous trip to Colorado.

**Words of thanks to your internship funding donors:**

This might have been the best trip I took this summer, and it had some hefty competition. Thank you so much for the opportunity. I've had to stop talking about it with my friends because it makes them jealous.