

This summer was a summer of firsts. I had my first internship, which was also my first paying job; I experienced living in an apartment for the first time and the responsibility of paying rent and utilities; and I gained experience buying my own groceries and being generally self-sufficient. This meant I also had my first stab at making and keeping my own budget. Furthermore, thanks to a weather incident unrelated to my internship, I had to deal with car insurance and the replacement of a busted headlight, which I view as a very “adult” task. 2013 was, in short, a summer of independence and growth.

I spent this summer living and working in the mountains of southwestern North Carolina in the small town of Murphy (a town with a population of not quite 2,000 individuals). A fellow intern and I rented a small economical apartment just about a block from downtown. From our front door, it was a mere five minute drive to the Tusquitee Ranger District office, which served as the base for all my internship adventures. The Tusquitee Ranger district is the westernmost of the three districts that make up the Nantahala National Forest. The Nantahala, the largest of North Carolina’s four national forests, encompasses 531,148 acres of beautiful mountains, valleys, coves, and lakes in the southwestern corner of the state. It was established in 1920 under the Weeks Act, which allowed the acquisition of land to form national forests in order to protect watersheds, provide timber, and regulate the flow of navigable streams. Prior to this summer, I believed that my frequent visits to National Forests with my family had made me more or less an expert on them. However, I only ever saw the Forests through the eyes of a visitor keen on camping, hiking, and horseback riding. This summer, working as an intern for the Forest’s NEPA Planning Team allowed me a unique behind-the-scenes perspective that enabled me to learn *about* the objective and the organization of National Forest Service and *from* the personal experiences and advice of many of its employees.

The most incredible aspect of this internship was the variety of projects that I was able to learn about and contribute to. During a typical week, I would work in the office three or four days and accompany various Forest Service staff into the field on the remaining days. In the office, I worked closely with Steverson Moffat, the head of the NEPA Planning Team and my supervisor, carrying out Forest Service policy to NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) standards. Every project that is proposed in the Nantahala National Forest must go through a series of steps including public involvement and determination of environmental consequences. I was often responsible for writing scoping letters as well as notice and comment letters, which were then mailed to the public; drafting legal notices that were subsequently published in the appropriate newspaper; and writing decision memos, which notified the public of a decision and outlined the scope of the project, its purpose and need, and the environmental consequences. Each of these responsibilities required knowledge of the project and the ability to remove the pertinent information from multiple documents and combine it into a coherent whole. This required careful awareness of language and phrasing as it was important to convey to the public the scope and need for the project without leaving room for interpretation. My other tasks included comparing final draft documents and creating generic templates to facilitate the future writing of both Biological Evaluations and the third chapter of Environmental Assessments (concerning environmental consequences); organizing and filing twelve years of documents and correspondence to create a comprehensive project file for a controversial project that was nearing its final decision; and creating a clearly indexed appeal record for the same project.

My experiences in the field were equally varied. I had the opportunity to learn first-hand about many of the professions encompassed by the Forest Service by assisting various specialists on the NEPA Planning Team as well as other Forest staff. I aided Jason Farmer, the fisheries biologist, in adding lime to tributary streams to increase the pH to levels more suitable

for native organisms. I also helped him with the follow-up measurements, including pH readings, surveying the streambed, pebble counts, and benthic macroinvertebrate collection. Furthermore, I assisted Jason, a pair of Fish and Wildlife representatives, and some of the recreation personnel while they performed cutting and cabling of trees in Hiwassee Lake to provide fish habitats. I accompanied April Punsalan, the botanist, on three occasions to four separate proposed timber stands to survey for endangered, threatened, or sensitive plant species as well as non-native invasives. I also accompanied Andrew Triplett, the archeologist, on his rounds to check for disturbance at historic sites and assisted him and his intern with shovel and surface tests to determine if areas were archeologically important. I do regret that I was never able to work with the fourth specialist of the NEPA Team, Le'Andra Smith, the wildlife biologist; however, she was out of town for the duration of my internship. Apart from the NEPA Planning Team specialists, I was fortunate enough to accompany at various times, Angela Gee the Assistant Ranger, Bobby Burrell the timber specialist, and Chad Cook the Fire Management Officer and profit from their knowledge of their respective fields.

In retrospect, I can see the ways in which I have grown through this internship. Not only have I become more comfortable in my independence by living and working away from home, but I have also grown more self-assured when it comes to assuming responsibility and appreciating that, even as an intern, I can do meaningful work and be useful to an organization. Finally, working with the Forest Service has allowed me to connect with some incredible people who, I have no doubt, will be more than willing to advise and recommend me in the future. I never viewed this internship as simply a chance to decide if I wanted to work with the National Forest Service or in one of the associated professions. I saw it as an opportunity to broaden my horizons and enrich myself as a person. Looking back, I know that the things I learned and the ways in which I grew go beyond merely the work I did in the office and the field. Put simply, I

have gained life experience that will prove beneficial no matter what career path I choose and that is truly valuable.