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Capstone Report Spring 2016

My experience as the undergraduate member of Team Honduras and as a part of the 8th cohort of the Center for Collaborative Conservation's Fellows Program has been surprising, challenging, inspiring, and incredibly educational. Dr. Suzanne Kent, our team leader and one of my professors in the Anthropology department, suggested during an advisory meeting that I combine the fellowship with my capstone project. This opportunity allowed me to focus on elements of anthropology and conservation which overlapped and were of most interest to me, and it also forced me to reflect on the portions of each of these fields that I most wanted to take with me and possibly pursue post-graduation. I believe the inclusion of undergraduates in projects of this caliber is really incredible because it provides students with the opportunity to work with a team of experienced academics and practitioners and to watch and learn, to ask questions, and to see the effort that goes into this type of collaborative conservation work.

The first meeting of the fellows was inspiring because we were able to hear everyone's ideas for projects and their passion for this type of inclusive conservation. It was also very educational to be a part of the more administrative aspects of a project of this nature. Budgets, expenditures, and travel may not be the most glamorous of topics, but they are realities that most undergraduates are not exposed to until their first job post-graduation, where they may not have the same level of mentorship that we experienced within the CCC.

Combining this experience with my capstone and impending graduation was particularly timely for me. In the process of planning for my future, I was able to see what skills I already possessed and could offer to a future employer. The fellowship also illuminated areas where I

was either lacking in skills or needed further work or education. The fellows retreat was particularly valuable to me for several reasons as I thought about and planned for my future. Being surrounded by a group of people who had not only done so much in their careers that I respected but, in many cases had gone through several career changes, was both motivating as well as reassuring. I don't think I am alone in feeling the pressure to identify, pursue, and decide on a career right out of college that is both meaningful and fulfilling as well as fits my skills and lifestyle. I think this is a pretty common stress that soon-to-be graduates place upon themselves. It was encouraging to see the long and varied careers that the fellows and instructors have had, and to take that as proof that there is plenty of time and opportunity to figure out just what career might be the best fit for me. Additionally, the retreat offered some really incredible opportunities to develop and learn about different skills that are important in the field of conservation, and that could also be applicable to all manner of areas and different professions. In particular, I felt that the mediation seminar and the discussion on scientific storytelling were skills that I would be able to take with me, use, and build upon in the future. Both of these sessions helped me realize specific strengths and weaknesses that I possess, and provided me with the tools to improve in those areas where I felt weakest. Finally, and somewhat interestingly, working with Team Honduras and interacting with the other fellows really made me appreciate my choice of degree.

I think another common source of stress for many seniors is fear and doubt about whether or not their degree was the right choice for them personally and professionally. Although I truly enjoyed my anthropology classes, there were times when I had doubts about whether my course work would be applicable to any field other than anthropology. I loved hearing about the academic backgrounds of the other fellows and getting to see through the course of our discussions how those studies may have helped shape their individual viewpoints, and how the

convergence of all those different perspectives sometimes made the work of conservation more difficult but also ultimately richer and more complete. Most of all, participating in the in-depth discussions regarding collaborative conservation work at the retreat made me feel appreciative of the foundation that anthropology has provide me, and optimistic about my abilities to apply those skills and perspectives to whatever path I choose to pursue.

I am incredibly grateful for the members of Team Honduras and the opportunities I have had working with them. Listening to the conversations and observing the process of how the direction of a project develops overtime and how decisions are made and approaches are negotiated - and sometimes even changed - has been a valuable experience for me. As Robin Reid said at the retreat: step #0 in collaborative research is understanding the history, context, and people. Working with Team Honduras has emphasized this point and made me appreciate just how true this is, not only in conservation work but really in any situation in which we are trying to negotiate and work together with other people. The members of Team Honduras have demonstrated to me how important, however difficult, it is to approach projects without an ego or a sense of competition, and how important are qualities like adaptability, humility, and a willingness to listen and learn from others. These points were introduced at the Fellows Retreat, and it was especially valuable to have them so plainly and immediately embodied by the members of Team Honduras. Especially interesting to me were cases where the original question/problem that had been identified to answer/solve changed after actually spending time in a location or meeting with people, which further emphasized the importance of flexibility. As I witnessed members of Team Honduras negotiating with one another and debating the best ways to approach and include other potential participants, a point that stuck with me was Rick Knight's saying that, in a fight there is always a loser and often times the loser is left with a

sense of resentment, especially if going along with the “winner’s” plan/approach is a contingency of losing, therefore negotiations should never be structured as a fight but as a compromise where everyone feels invested.

As someone who is in the earliest stage of deciding what career path to pursue, what I appreciated most about this experience was just how much of it transcends any one field of work or study. Ultimately, even if I were to choose a seemingly unrelated track, I know I will be able to apply so much of what I have learned working with Team Honduras, the other fellows, and the CCC. My experiences here have not only made me a stronger candidate, they have made me quite simply, a better more well-rounded person. I look forward to continuing to be a part of this incredible organization in any way I can.