

Murphy Sayre, C' 12
Wild Basin Preserve internship in Austin, TX
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The Environmental Studies Internship Fund awarded to me by Career Services at the University of the South allowed me to work for eight weeks at a wilderness preserve in Austin, Texas. The Wild Basin Wilderness Preserve is a 227-acre area that preserves flora and fauna native to the Texas Hill Country. This area is especially unique because it is a wilderness preserve surrounded by an urban periphery. It was founded about thirty years ago when a group of women fought to protect this tract of land from the urban sprawl of a growing Austin. For the next two decades the Basin succeeded in surviving from grants from Travis County and donations from local Austin citizens. Because its purpose is preservation rather than recreation, Wild Basin cannot offer amenities such as camping, biking, and swimming that would bring in extra revenue. So in recent years Wild Basin has faced severe financial difficulties. The result was the termination of all paid employees at that time and the appointment of an interim director, Mitchell Robinson (Sewanee C'07). Since then a new head director has been appointed leaving Mitch the Land Manager. In December of 2009 I contacted Mitch asking if he thought he could use my help as an intern in Summer 2010. He was very responsive and helpful in making sure everything worked out. As Mitch was the only employee that worked every day at the Wild Basin, my job was to be his apprentice and help him in any endeavor around the preserve however big or small.

My time at Wild Basin was divided up into the different task areas. The first was the maintenance of trails -- either building new ones or fixing areas that had been eroded. The second was hiking throughout the Basin and keeping track of areas greatly affected by invasive species of plants and taking steps to eliminate the alien plants. The last third of my time was spent organizing the geology section of the Trail Guide Manual. I also worked at the cash register in the gift shop answering visitor's questions.

I didn't really know what to expect from this job. But my first day was a great example of the kind of work that I would grow to enjoy over the course of the summer. For the first task I accompanied Mitch on a hike of the perimeter of the preserve, which must be done quarterly. This was done over the course of two days and included duties such as marking areas infected with invasive plants on the GPS, checking the fences for damage, and using a GPS unit to mark the boundary of the Basin where a fence needs to be put in place.

Maintenance of trails required me to both maintain already designated trails and build new ones. Maintenance could include placement of erosion bars to keep the trails from being eroded by the rain. It also included taking cedar posts we'd cut and hammering them into the bedrock with rebar to make steps up a steep hill. This was by far the most physically challenging part of the job, but it was also the most

rewarding when I, myself, was able to walk up the very steps I built to the top of a hill.

In my final few weeks on the preserve, Mitch's idea to build a new trail farther away from a creek that was being disrupted by foot traffic was approved by Travis County. Building a trail from complete wilderness was an exciting task. We first mapped out the route, trying as best we could to avoid large oaks and juniper. We then cleared the trails with rakes, saws, and pick mattocks. This task was more difficult than it might have been because chainsaws are only allowed during the winter on county property. Erosion bars were put in and we lined the trail with rocks for aesthetic pleasure. I was not able to see this task all the way to completion, but I was able to help complete 90% of it, which will be great to hike when I return to the Wild Basin.

The community of Westlake, in which the Wild Basin resides, is a suburban area that has managed fairly well with keeping the community green with vegetation. However much of this vegetation is made up of invasive plants. Steps are not usually taken to eliminate these plants in neighborhoods because, for the most part, many of these invasives are pleasing to the untrained eye. In fact, when looking at my parent's house in this area I found that many trees and shrubs that have been in my lawn for fifteen years are actually invasive. But now I know and have seen the detrimental effects that these alien plants can have on native species, choking them out and absorbing available water. At the Basin we mostly had to deal with Chinese lagustrum and chaste tree. These species had an incredible ability to grow fast, even after being cut, and taking over populations of native trees, especially in close proximity to the creeks that ran through the preserve. Mitch and I would spend hours cutting and herbiciding these plants. Sometimes we would do this only to find that the largest one of these species, which had produced the rest in a given area, was just over the Basin's boundary, safe from our handsaws and herbicide.

An important service Wild Basin provides to the community is tours of the preserve for kids. Either for summer camps during the summer or school groups during the fall and spring. The tour guides are all volunteers. These volunteers must read the trail tour guide manual before going out with a group. One of my tasks was to sort through the clutter of research papers that have been written about the geology of the Texas Hill Country or the Wild Basin. I attempted to put together a report which would provide the tour guides with just enough information to be able to describe the geology of this area to a group of kids, without overwhelming them. Wayne Orłowski, a seasoned volunteer trail guide, aided me. Wayne received his geology degree from the University of Tennessee and then went on to work with many oil companies in the field of petroleum geology. It was a good experience to get advice from somebody who has worked in this field.

In addition to real world exposure to preserving natural resources, I gained valuable experience in a possible career path that I could take after college. I would love to have a position such as Mitch's, especially so soon after graduating college. I

believe it could be a stepping-stone for him or even a possible permanent position, given the way he is helping to guide Wild Basin to a promising future as a research facility. As for myself, I would prefer to use this type of job as a stepping-stone, and I believe this was an important realization.

My career goals were also affected by some older, very experienced, people who have held occupations in natural resources. Wayne Orłowski, mentioned above, and Monica Swartz, the new Wild Basin director, have both worked in different areas concerning natural resources. Wayne has worked commercially as a petroleum geologist for private companies. This is one path that might fit me. Another possible path that interested me even more involves environmental policy and the research that might go along with it. Monica Swartz, explained to me the in's and out's of the legislative mitigation required to protect land from development. This work also requires statistical studies and assessment of research data to provide evidence for why a certain area should be protected, whether it is for wildlife or for extraordinary geologic formations, such as aquifers that provide water. Overall, these interactions with professionals in the field that I am bound for provided me with important career insights and life insights, and I am very grateful that I had these opportunities.