Summer 2011: Wild Basin Preserve; Austin, Texas

This summer I interned at the Wild Basin Preserve in Austin, Texas. Wild Basin is a 227-acre protected area off of Highway 360, just outside of the city of Austin. There are over 3 miles of hiking trails through woodland, grassland, and streamside habitats. The main goal of the Basin is:

*The Wild Basin Wilderness Preserve, in its role as an interdisciplinary laboratory of St. Edward’s University, exists to protect and maintain its urban wilderness, and to promote the importance of environmental education, research, conservation and preservation. Collaboration between Wild Basin and St. Edward’s enables the creation of programs and initiatives that serve to fulfill the mission. (Mission Statement, [www.wildbasin.org](http://www.wildbasin.org)).*

The Basin protects several different species, including the Golden Cheeked Warbler, the Black Capped Viero, and several Karst Invertebrates including salamanders and toads. This area is within the Balcones Canyonland Preserve and plays a large role in keeping this different endangered species protected.

It was first established in 1974. There is an Environmental Education Center open Monday-Friday 9am-4pm. The trails are open daily from sun up to sundown. There are beginner, intermediate, and expert trails, including one that
is handicap accessible. There are maps available to navigate the trails, along with clear markings that navigate through all of the trails. All of the trails are loops, so if you feel lost you just keep walking and will end up back at the Environmental Education Center.

I had several responsibilities at Wild Basin. My main research topic was to help develop and update Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the Balcones Canyonland Preserve. The original plan was written in the 1980’s and was very dated. Due to development (i.e. roads, housing complexes, stores), many of the habitats of endangered species were suffering. My goal was to come up with as many different idea’s as possible to update the existing plan. I researched population increases, salary increases, water depletion, and road development in order to figure out how to best suit the environment for an update.

The research I did was extensive. In my first few days, I met with the Wild Basin Director, Monica Swartz, to discuss several different project ideas. After an extensive meeting in her home, I narrowed it down to helping update the Habitat Conservation Plan. After this, she put me in contact with several people. I had a long meeting with Kevin Connally, who is a Fish and Wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service out of the Austin Ecological Services Field Office. He is an expert in Habitat Conservation Plans and talked me through several scenarios that would help with my research. He took the time to answer all of my questions and really get me started in the right direction.
One of the most interesting parts of my summer was sitting in on a water planning meeting. I sat in as a large company discussed ideas on how to get more water into the city and surrounding cities in order to help replenish the water supply during the drought. The company wanted to drill down past the existing aqueducts and develop another system. This would require several million dollars in funding and also harm the habitat of a few different species that are on the endangered species list. I was not able to be there for the official voting, since it was a private event. I was lucky enough to sit in on this private meeting that was closed to the public, but my boss thought it would be good for my research. It was very interesting to see how companies have to come to the committee to ask permission before any type of action is taken.

Along with my research, I helped out on trail maintenance one day a week. On Thursdays, we would go out and do any trail repairs that may be needed. This included updating old signs, fixing trail maps, stabling a water bridge, clearing trails, and marking diseased trees for export out of the area. This was a great part of my summer. I was able to really learn from a trail manager how to keep a place like Wild Basin running for the people of the area to enjoy.

One of the biggest plusses from the summer was my increase in my research ability. I chose the topic of Habitat Conservation Plans because I knew very little about them. I was able to dig through old records and books to figure out not only what they are, but how they benefitted a community. I was able to see a lot of research that a regular member of the public would not be able to see. The woman I worked for, Monica, was new to the area after coming from the
Coachella Valley in California. She worked to set up the Habitat Conservation Plan there and actually wrote several hundred pages. I was able to work with several educated people in my field, along with Mitch Robinson, a Sewanee grad from 2007.

A high point of my summer, along with the water planning meeting I was able to attend, was getting to learn about something that I had no idea existed. I learned how hard of a process it would be for a big corporation to just come in and set up an office/headquarters. There are several years of planning, researching, and evaluating the land that go into a project before ground is even broken. Another high point was helping Mitch develop a presentation for a group of international high school students. They were touring the country for the summer, and made a stop in Austin to visit the Basin and the cold springs downtown. I was able to compile information on how the Basin first developed and how the group of women that started it were able to get the necessary funding to make that area a nationally protected site.

One minor low point I experienced was living on my own for the first time. I had lived with friends in other cities away from home before, but this time I was completely on my own. I was in an apartment by myself in a city I had never visited before. I call this a minor low point because it was only an issue for about the first week I was there. I was able to connect with people through other friends (often Sewanee people) and make friends in a city that was foreign to me.

My overall experience with my summer at Wild Basin Preserve was very positive. I was able to learn about a new topic and really dig deep into it. I was
able to really contribute and help with a big project that would affect the entire area. I am very grateful to have received the funding I did from the school. It truly helped to make the summer of 2011 one of the most memorable ones I have had.