

Internship Report

This summer I interned with Upstate Forever in Greenville, South Carolina. This internship provided me with the opportunity to further explore my interests in the non-profit and environmental conservation fields through daily interaction with conservation professionals, landowners and volunteers.

Upstate Forever is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting sensible growth and preserving special places in the Upstate region of South Carolina. The organization has three divisions focusing on sustainable communities, clean water and air, and land conservation. Upstate Forever was the first land trust in South Carolina to receive national accreditation from the Land Trust Alliance and has protected over 17,000 acres of rural and natural landscapes since 1998. I served as an intern with the land conservation staff. In this role I assisted with the day-to-day operations of the trust by preparing conservation easements, creating baseline reports, and monitoring conservation properties. Additionally, I used GIS mapping to identify parcels with significant conservation value, recruited landowners for the conservation program, and updated land trust policies as part of the organization's reaccreditation process.

The vast majority of land protection occurs through the attachment of conservation easements to the deeds of privately held lands. Conservation easements are legally binding agreements made between Upstate Forever and private landowners that limit future development and specify land use of a particular property. The numerous advantages of conservation easements included the permanent preservation of the property, maintenance of private ownership and various tax benefits for the landowner. This method of conservation is most often used for family farms, inherited estates and other rural and agricultural lands. Once a property is placed under an easement, Upstate Forever has the responsibility monitor that property through annual visits and continued communication with the property owner. The second, and less frequent, method by which Upstate Forever conserves properties is through

the transfer of lands from private to public ownership. This method often includes funding the project through private donations, placing a conservation easement upon the property, and transferring ownership to state or federal landholders. The organization's primary focus areas include the Blue Ridge escarpment along the North Carolina and Georgia borders and the fertile farmland in the area to the southeast of Greenville.

The conservation easement process is multifaceted and requires significant staff/landowner interaction before, during, and after the drafting and implementation of the easement. The vast majority of my time with Upstate Forever was spent preparing the baseline documentation reports and legal documents required for conservation easements. In the initial phases of the easement process staff members meet with prospective easement donors on their property to gauge their interests in conservation and to address any questions and concerns that they might have. On these site visits I was afforded the opportunity to walk the land and to get to know the stories of the farmers and landowners while exploring the unique rural landscapes of Upstate South Carolina. I also took photos of the various structures and unique features of every property and included them in the easement documentation files.

After the initial contact and site visit with the landowner, the land trust staff prepares a baseline documentation report that highlights the various aesthetic and physical features of the property including the structures, land use, soil type, and several other attributes. I was responsible for producing several baseline documentation reports during my time in Greenville. This required me to hone descriptive writing skills and to learn and use basic Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping technology. Once the baseline documentation report is complete, land trust staff prepares the legal conservation easement document that will be attached to the deed of the property. I was lucky to be involved in the drafting and negotiation of several conservation easements.

A large portion of my summer was also spent preparing documents and revising organizational policies for the reaccreditation process. Land trusts nationwide are governed by the Land Trust Alliance (LTA). The Alliance has established a set of guidelines and standards for land trusts in an effort to promote best management practices and ensure the long-term vitality of its member organizations. These guidelines ensure tax law compliance, promote sound financial structures, and shield land trusts from future legal disputes. Once organizations complete the rigorous accreditation process they must apply for reaccreditation every five years. When I arrived in Greenville, I was tasked with reviewing current LTA accreditation guidelines, identifying areas for improvement in existing Upstate policies, and generating new policies to fulfill LTA's guidelines. These policies ranged from file protection guidelines to partnership agreement templates. This project enhanced my understanding of the federal and state laws that affect land conservation organizations and improved my ability to draft technical documents.

I cannot overstate my gratefulness to the Career Services and the University as a whole for the internship opportunities that I have had as a student and recent graduate. These internships have supplemented my academic experiences and have allowed me to create a network of public officials, conservation professionals, and environmental activists across the southeast. In my search for full-time employment I have come to rely heavily upon those I have worked with as a Sewanee intern. This internship, and others funded by the University, honed my skills, directed my career goals, and expanded my professional network.