

### **Panola Mountain State Park: Natural Resource Management Intern**

This past summer I worked as a natural resource management intern at Panola Mountain State Park in Stockbridge, Georgia. Even though this internship made me realize that my calling will probably not involve working for a state government agency, I can say that this experience taught me about myself and what my true passions are. I definitely learned from my time at the park, and I am so happy that I took advantage of this opportunity.

Panola Mountain State Park is a relatively small, day-use park in Stockbridge, Georgia, which is about 15 miles southeast of Atlanta. The park is part of the Georgia State Parks system, which is more commonly referred to as the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Most of the park is a conservation area, which includes the highlight of the park and the parks namesake: a 100-acre granite monadnock (a small granite mountain) named Panola Mountain. Also in the conservation area are several hundred acres of grasslands that are in the process of being converted onto native grasslands, and the “Power of Flight” area, which is used as a bird watching and bird-banding area. The main focus of the park’s public use is the two lakes that can be used for fishing and boating. The public can also rent out several picnic shelters, use the playground, and explore the museum and retail area in the nature center. The park is currently being run by the assistant manager and acting manager, Jamey Rabun, while a more permanent manager is being searched for. The other employees include a desk employee/secretary, a naturalist, a part-time natural resource manager, and two maintenance workers.

As my intern responsibilities, I would rotate between working at the front desk, leading or co-leading hikes, taking care of the resource management that the park needed, and helping with the programming that the park put on. The programs that I helped with were the Junior Ranger program, night hikes, and archery. Even though my official title was natural resource management intern, I was able to take advantage of more aspects of the park than just the resource management. Sometimes, during my internship, I was not exactly pleased at how many

other assignments I was given, but looking back, I'm glad that I got to experience more aspects of how a park is managed day-to-day.

I think that the fact that I was able to do so many different tasks around the park enabled me to expand my skill-set further than if I had just been focused on one area of park management. I now have a greater handle on customer service, park finances, program development, and park maintenance, in addition to furthering my knowledge of resource management. The main reason I wanted to work at this park was because I wanted practical knowledge of what I was learning at Sewanee, and while I think that I definitely achieved this, I wish that I had been given more tasks that involved resource management.

The tasks that I was assigned at the park included working at the front desk of the park, which entailed handling the retail sales, answering calls and any questions that the patrons had, feeding the small animals that the nature center holds, and balancing the accounts at the end of the work day. I believe that this task helped my customer service skills, my financial skills, and more generally my ability to think on my feet. One of the more fun projects that I was assigned was being a counselor for the 6-8 years olds in the park's Junior Ranger camp. The camp itself was focused on teaching children about ecology and sustainability while also incorporating games and activities into the camp like fishing. I was in charge of 15 children, and even though it was a very fun project for me, it was also extremely challenging. The skills that I gained from this activity were definitely leadership and, again customer service and people skills.

One part of my internship that I was most nervous about was leading hikes. I have never been very confident in explaining ideas to large groups of people, so when I was asked to start leading hikes, I was terrified. However, once I lead my first hike, I found that I actually really enjoyed it, and was able to answer the questions of the patrons with much more ease than I thought possible from myself. This part of my internship proved to be extremely helpful for me when it comes to me being able to talk to groups, and also helped my leadership skills. I will

definitely be able to use what I learned from leading hikes in my Junior Presentations class that I am taking this fall.

Probably the most important skill that I developed this summer in relation to my future career path was the act that I was able to gain practical knowledge of natural resource management. I was able to work with the native grasses initiative in the park, as well as working on eradicating non-native species such as Chinese Privet that can easily destroy the ecological soundness of the park. I was able to work one-on-one with the natural resource manager, Phil Delestrez, at both Panola Mountain State Park and Hard Labor Creek State Park on the projects mentioned, as well as trail maintenance and wildflower plantings. I am very grateful for the opportunity that I was given at these two parks, and for the knowledge that I gain that I will be able to use in my future careers.

I think that the high point for me during this experience was the point, about 3 weeks into my internship, when I was given about a one-hour notice before my first unsupervised hike. The regular leader, our naturalist Amy Snow, was running late for work and I would need to fill in for her. My immediate reaction was fear. I didn't know what I was going to say, and minute-by-minute, I was becoming unsure of myself. However, when the hike was beginning, I found that I not only knew what I was doing, but I felt confident doing it. The hike was a success and I felt much more confident with explaining important concepts about the natural world and our natural resources than I did before this summer. From this experience, I learned that to learn new things, I will sometimes need to get out of my comfort zone.

As far as my low point for the summer goes, I don't think that I have one specific example, rather a collective disappointment from the experience. I definitely would have wanted to focus on the natural resource management and programs part of the job instead of the front desk and financial part of the internship. Even though I wasn't able to completely focus on what

I wanted to all of the time, I do not regret my internship. I think that by working at the front desk so much, I able to improve my customer service skills.

I am extremely grateful for this opportunity, and for the funding that Sewanee gave me so that I could participate in this internship. I definitely learned more practical knowledge of resource management, and now feel more confident in my skills in resource management as well as my customer service skills. I cannot imagine having had a more rewarding summer.