

Summer at Strawberry Plains

Upon starting my internship this summer, I did not know much about the world of conservation or what it was like working for a non-profit organization. Growing up in Germantown, TN, I was used to spending my childhood at various parks in the surrounding area and on the Wolf River, but my general knowledge of nature, conservation, and wildlife in general didn't extend much past that. It wasn't until my senior year of high school that I started to become more interested in conservation and ecology/biology as a whole. After deciding to attend Mississippi State University for my undergraduate degree, I chose to study environmental sciences but focusing more on the agricultural side of things. I was by no means familiar with agricultural terminology or practices going in, but I was eager to see what this type of field could offer me. After a few semesters at Mississippi State, I still found myself drawn to conservation work and what it would be like for me to work in a non-profit organization. So when it came time for me to look at internships, I decided to look for more conservation/land management type jobs versus looking for more agriculturally centered internships. After being contacted by Mitch early in the spring semester, I was excited by the opportunity to see what it would actually be like to work for a non-profit organization, and that I would get to branch out into a similar yet different field from what I was used to learning about.

Going into my internship with Strawberry Plains, I wasn't sure what my summer would entail. I assumed most of it would consist of keeping up the area, with some specific tasks each week. In the beginning, the other interns, Ryan and Matt, and I were helping primarily get ready for the native plant sale. It wasn't the most taxing job we had, but it gave me a chance to get to know one of the lovely volunteers at Strawberry Plains, Sue. Plus getting to hear Kristen, who is the Interpretive Garden Specialist at Strawberry Plains and helped oversee us throughout the summer, talk and be able to describe all the plants in such detail was eye-opening and made me want to start learning more about plants native to Mississippi. Once the plant sale was over, we started getting into more diverse tasks throughout the summer. We helped create more diversity within the wildflower meadow by pulling goldenrods and Japanese stilt grass, and cutting back some other grasses. We got to help create a trail that connected to Otter Pond, take down some pine trees, and even helped with some research about different plants, animals, birds, reptiles, and invertebrates that you would find in the surrounding area. Towards the end of my internship, we helped with a summer camp as well. The summer camp was one of my favorite things, just by seeing all those kids excited to learn about the different things each day, and always ready for whatever we had planned that day was really wonderful. The classes/workshops that were offered on the weekends were amazing as well. The comparative anatomy, and snake class were definitely very interesting for me!

Working at Strawberry Plains over the summer also helped me view things in a different light. I look at dead trees now as a habitat for a multitude of birds, how spider's webs are a key part to hummingbird's nests, and how native plants sustain more wildlife than common landscaping practices that bring in plants non-native to the U.S. I used to think that human's role in conservation was trying to minimize use of natural resources and to hold onto the mentality that the less used, the better. Most people focus on conservation of coal, petroleum, and water,

but humans have and still are causing great damage to ecosystems through selfishness for resources, pollution, and creating landscapes that don't support biodiversity. I used to not fully understand just how important biodiversity was to wildlife and to humans. Biodiversity boosts ecosystem productivity where each species, no matter how small, all have an important role to play. Greater species diversity ensures natural sustainability for all life forms. And over the summer, I started thinking about how I view conservation and what I thought my role was. After a few weeks at Strawberry Plains, I realized that in matters such as these, you can't look at it as a quick fix. Conservation is sometimes a slow process and realizing that each little thing helps in the long run. So while it may not seem like that much has been done to some people, in the grand scheme of things, we are making progress towards a better tomorrow. With that being said, what I now believe the role of humans in conservation is to make it necessary to start trying to actively conserve resources, ecosystems, and remember that we share Earth with more than just ourselves and every little thing you can do can make a difference.

Before starting my internship at Strawberry Plains, I didn't know much about non-profit organizations. I knew the general definition of what a non-profit was and some examples of non-profit organizations, but not much past that. Over the summer, I learned a bit about how the grant process goes, how important it is to have volunteers, how putting on events and retaining donors all go into keeping Audubon's mission alive. After working at Strawberry Plains, my desire to work in conservation has increased. It also opened my eyes to some jobs that I hadn't thought about before within this field. Whether I work for a non-profit or a government agency is still up for debate.

Overall, my time at Strawberry Plains was a wonderful experience. I have made amazing memories, gained valuable skills and knowledge, and met some fantastic people along the way. I'll be forever grateful to have spent my summer at such an amazing place.