

### **Trading My Suit For Hiking Boots**

My passion for tropical ecology began before I knew what the words meant. Being exposed to lush tropical rainforests when my family moved into a stilted house in Costa Rica in 1990 is probably the cause. My memories are vague, but the photos of a giant three-toed sloth and me, or the Howler monkeys eating fruit on our roof, tell a compelling story. Despite my early exposure to the subject, I had no plans of pursuing a career in tropical ecology. However, when I accepted a job trading commodities at Wilshire Quinn Capital, a financial services firm in Los Angeles, I was apprehensive about my new career. I was torn between notions of corporate success and my personal interest in ecology. The month before I was supposed to start, I began to contemplate my life experiences to try to understand my reservations.

I have traveled on a shoestring to 34 countries and at least 75 islands. Traveling has significantly broadened my knowledge of geography, culture, the environment and languages, but most importantly, it taught me how to thrive in foreign societies and extreme locations. For example, by spending the majority of the last year in five Muslim countries, including Indonesia and Malaysia, I am familiar with the Malay language and Islamic societies. Likewise, multiple expeditions in Spain and Latin America bolstered my coursework in Spanish. The assimilation skills I learned traveling were essential to complete my undergraduate thesis research in Fiji.

On the Yasawa archipelago in Fiji where I conducted my research, setting foot on any island required permission from village chiefs. By integrating myself into their traditional chiefdom society through activities like spear fishing, farming, and kava\* ceremonies, I built a rapport that allowed me to conduct research on their islands. Traveling to uninhabited islands required local fishermen to provide transport and chiefs to grant visitation rights.

Working completely alone on islands without any infrastructure or trails, and repeatedly falling ill, made my fieldwork in Fiji demanding. I worked 70-80 hours a week, taking time from research to give ecology presentations to local schools. I camped on the sand in villages or stayed with host families in their palm-frawn huts. Complying with the necessary traditions of visitors was critical, and my hosts jokingly reminded me that less than a century ago they were cannibals! Completing my research in Fiji required fortitude and resolve.

My proposed research in Malaysia will again require extensive travel to remote tropical areas and interaction with local people. To access traditional Orang Asli land and collaborate with Muslim researchers, I will draw heavily from my experiences around the world to complete my proposed research project.

In addition to my larger research endeavors overseas, as an undergraduate I was active in several local conservation issues. One example began during *Biogeography of California* (a class at UCLA) where I learned about an endangered succulent plant confined to a microhabitat exactly where my family lives in San Diego. To raise local awareness, I constructed a population viability analysis, created a *Wikipedia* site describing the species' precarious situation, and posted notices in the habitat vicinity.

My four undergraduate years at UCLA were critical in stimulating my aptitude for academics and research. I earned two bachelors degrees and graduated Cum Laude with the highest honors from both my college and my department. Outside the classroom, I developed a research plan from scratch, applied statistical and advanced geo-spatial methods to explore my data, presented the results to the AAAS Pacific Division conference, and published a manuscript.

\*Kava is a ceremonial drink made from crushed roots, widely revered across Pacific islands

My success in research and academics was mirrored in the corporate workplace during the three years that I worked as an Account Executive for UCLA Media. Although I had sought employment throughout college to help cover tuition and living expenses, I excelled at my demanding position. My job required exceptional communication skills, self-motivation and efficacy in leading a sales and marketing team. During 2007, I was the top-producing account executive for the highest grossing collegiate ad campaign in the nation. Compensation was commission based, and I became the highest paid student employee at UCLA.

My passion for ecology and business complemented each other in school. In the economics department, I was exposed to the harsh realities developing nations face. Simultaneously, the geography department's Environmental Studies program opened my eyes to the wonders of tropical ecology and to an assortment of global environmental issues. The breadth of my studies created a holistic picture of ecology and the threats of development. My take home message was that the current rate of deforestation outpaces our allocation of the necessary research and resources for conservation. Today, my research prioritizes fundamental processes in tropical ecology that have direct implications for forest management and conservation.

When I graduated from UCLA and accepted Wilshire Quinn Capital's six-figure salary offer, my decision was influenced by my work experience in sales and marketing and my degree in economics. While my compensation package was appealing, I was abandoning my passion for ecology, and to be blunt: I was selling out. I thought about my father's decision to quit his lucrative job as a stockbroker in the 1980's to pursue his personal view of success in healthcare. I realized that pursuing my passion for ecology would ultimately provide a sense of fulfillment. So I put on my suit and walked back into the 54th floor office to explain why I had to decline their offer. I am looking for more than monetary success. I want to do what I am passionate about. I want to use my talents to help the world progress. When I look back at my life I need to be proud. Now that I am pursuing my PhD, I am proud, and I know that I made the right choice.

After finalizing the decision to study ecology, I chose to complete my PhD at UC Berkeley because of its unrivaled intellectual and logistical resources to research tropical ecology. I am already thriving and developing an exciting wide-scoped project. After graduate school, I plan to continue my research on fundamental forest processes and stay active in forest management and conservation. Moreover, I look forward directing my passion for tropical ecology towards teaching. Through post-doctoral positions and then joining the faculty of a research university, I can optimally pursue both teaching and research.

During college, I actively developed and executed philanthropic events with my service-oriented fraternity, Zeta Beta Tau. In addition, I was inspired by my autistic cousin to volunteer as a UCLA Special Olympics' soccer coach for three years. I hope one result of the NSF GRF will be to allow me the financial flexibility to continue coaching Special Olympics at Berkeley. Additionally, I would be thrilled if NSF's funding will provide the flexibility for me to teach "Explorative Traveling in the Tropics," a two unit undergraduate DeCal\* class that I am preparing. I am an ideal NSF GRFP scholar not only because I am submitting a novel proposal that demonstrates clear scientific merit, but also because I have prioritized Broader Impacts in my proposed research and throughout my life.

\* Democratic Education at Cal are graduate student taught classes