Sea Grant Alumni - To There from Here

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With this column, I am continuing my journey to find out what has happened to the former students that Connecticut Sea Grant has supported in some manner or another over the years. This column is devoted to interns, those students who gain additional practical experience by working in their chosen field under the guidance of one or more mentors. As far as I can recall, I never held an internship myself, but I have worked with several interns over time and found those experiences quite rewarding.

In 1995, Connecticut Sea Grant began supporting the Yale-Sea Grant internship program. The goal of the program was to link academic research with management or policy challenges faced by coastal communities. Graduate students in the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Center for Coastal and Watershed Systems (CCWS) were eligible to apply for competitively-awarded internships. The CCWS directors, with input from Sea Grant staff, reviewed the proposals and awarded internships several times a year. These internships typically lasted one or two semesters or a summer. Working with both faculty mentors and community partners, the interns conducted research and outreach projects that enabled them to gain practical experience related to the management of coastal resources or the development of coastal policies. The budgets for the individual internship projects were, to put it bluntly, quite cheap, typically two to three thousand dollars each. In return for the experience gained, the interns were required to present their projects in a seminar setting and submit a final report.

When I tallied the numbers, I was astonished to learn that 66 graduate students, mostly Masters students, were awarded Yale-Sea Grant internships between 1995 and 2010. Five of these former interns later became recipients of John A. Knauss Marine Policy Fellowships, the prestigious federal fellowship I described in the Spring/Summer 2010 issue of *Wrack Lines*. Today, eighty percent of these former Yale-Sea Grant interns have some tie to marine, aquatic or environmental science or policy in their careers as scientists, land use planners, journalists, environmental stewards, informal educators, K-12 teachers, university faculty, and resource managers for local, state or federal agencies, non-profit organizations or private businesses. Another fifteen percent are currently seeking additional degrees. While I am sure this success rate can be largely credited to their Yale education, I can’t help but think the practical experience gained from their Yale-Sea Grant internships may have helped some of them forge their career paths. What makes me think this? I emailed them all a few questions, and some were able to take time out of their busy lives to answer me.

Sea Grant programs are funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), under the U.S. Department of Commerce, in partnership with colleges and universities in each of the coastal and Great Lake states. Nationally, the Sea Grant investment in research, fellowships and internships serves as an important means for training tomorrow’s scientists, including those that will work for NOAA. I definitely see that link when I look at where our alumni are now. For example, three former Yale-Sea Grant interns work for NOAA directly. Marla Steinhoff (1999 intern) is a physical scientist in the NOAA National Ocean Service (NOS), Office of Response and Restoration; Ellen Clark (2000 intern) is currently Acting Deputy Director of the NOAA NOS Office of Operational Oceanographic Products and Services; and Sean Corson (2000 intern) is the Deputy Director of the Chesapeake Bay Office. A fourth also has ties to NOAA. Beth Bisson, who was an intern in 2004, is the Education Coordinator for Maine Sea Grant.

So, did these graduate student interns gain practical experience through their internships? According to David Casagrande, one of the first Yale-Sea Grant interns, the internship experience in 1995 contributed to his career by giving him “the confidence to think outside of the box”. He said, “I’m firmly convinced that the only way to solve environmental problems is to be interdisciplinary—to combine the natural and social sciences to impact policy.” Casagrande’s Sea Grant internship to study how people interact with coastal wetlands in Connecticut gave him the freedom to do that for the first time. He used the restoration of an urban salt marsh as a case study of a value-based approach to management. “I’ve built on that experience to assemble teams of ecologists, climatologists, and social scientists from several universities in several different countries to develop policy-oriented research on issues ranging from how to conserve medicinal plants to human adaptation to climate change and rising sea level in Pacific Island communities”, added Casagrande.

Currently an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Western Illinois University, Casagrande said, “I teach environmental studies and work on highly interdisciplinary research by collaborating in research teams. I study how people in different cultures interact with natural environments in order to determine how we can be sustainable on a global basis.” I imagine that’s quite an education in itself.

Ellen Clark held a Yale-Sea Grant internship in 2000. She is presently serving as Acting Deputy Director for the
NOAA Center for Operational Oceanographic Products and Services (CO-OPS), overseeing 130 oceanographers, engineers, and computer scientists. “My office provides the national infrastructure, science, and technical expertise to monitor, assess, and distribute tide, current, water level, and other coastal oceanographic products and services that support NOAA’s mission of environmental stewardship, environmental assessment, and prediction”, she said. I checked out their website, http://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/, to see how they take vast amounts of oceanographic data and make it available in a format that is useful to someone like me. With just a click or two of my mouse, I could see a map showing sea level trends for the east coast of the U.S. or zoom into the port of New Haven and find out that at this very moment the water level at New Haven is 2.8 feet and rising, winds are from the north at 11 knots, with gusts to 13 knots, air temperature is 53°F, and water temperature is 60°F. Pretty cool, Ellen!

NOAA is ripe with opportunities for individuals interested in ocean science and policy. Over the past ten years, Clark has held positions related to National Marine Sanctuaries, ocean and coastal resource management, and marine fisheries. According to Clark, the experience of working with state coastal managers to better understand their programs and policies for managing Harmful Algae Blooms opened her eyes to the complexities of coastal management and the wide array of challenges facing states. “The internship strengthened my interest in working to advance the conservation and sustainable use of coastal and ocean ecosystems through collaborative partnerships, strategies, and policies”, she said. “It also confirmed my commitment and desire to work for NOAA to help address these matters on a national scale in coordination with state and local partners.” Well said.

Shannon Heyck-Williams, an intern in 2000 as well, worked on a project to assess the costs and benefits of spraying pesticides to eliminate the West Nile mosquito vector in terms of ecological and human health risks. Today she works as a Government Relations Officer for the Pew Environment Group in Washington, D.C., providing political and policy advice on human health and industrial farming, conducting educational outreach to congressional offices and federal agencies, and analyzing and developing legislation and legislative strategies. Since graduating from Yale, she has worked as Senior Legislative Advisor for the National Environmental Trust, Earth Legacy Campaign Director for the Natural Resources Defense Council, and Research Assistant for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

“My Yale-Sea Grant internship provided the opportunity for me to delve deeper into [my interests in environmental health] than I otherwise would have”, said Heyck-Williams. The internship was an opportunity to research and write about a subject with real-world application, which very much appealed to her then and still does. “I continue to gravitate back to the environment and health nexus in my career”, she added.

A more recent graduate, Emily Levin was a Yale-Sea Grant intern in 2005. She is now a Planning Manager for Residential Energy Services at the Vermont Energy Investment Corporation, a nonprofit organization. “Specifically, I focus on strategic planning and program development for the existing homes and new construction services of Efficiency Vermont, Vermont’s statewide energy efficiency utility,” says Levin. Previously, she worked as the Restoration Program Manager for the Ipswich River Watershed Association in Ipswich, Massachusetts, working on a variety of projects to restore the river, with a focus on restoring natural flows and educating the community about low-water ways to maintain beautiful lawns and gardens.

Levin believes that the experience she gained in mapping water stress in the Salmon River watershed during her internship was directly relevant to her work for the watershed association, where she focused on water quantity and flow issues. Just like building a tower out of blocks, her job as a program manager for the watershed association gave her the management and planning experience that was required for her current position. “My internship was a very helpful step on my career path, and helped me to narrow down my interests and gain relevant experience”, Levin said.

I have truly enjoyed reading all the emails from these and other former interns. I can better appreciate how they made the most of a brief opportunity to gain some practical experience in their field of interest, and used it in combination with other educational experiences to launch themselves into their chosen careers. I think Casagrande expressed it well, saying “Since I was awarded my Sea Grant internship, I’ve gone on to study Tzeltal Mayan subsistence in Mexico, water policy in Phoenix, Arizona and how farmers along the Mississippi River adapt to flooding.” Thanks for sharing, folks.