Evergreen Statement of Purpose

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My interest in protecting our environment began in high school. A friend of mine, who had recently gone vegan, urged me to watch a handful of documentaries about the animal agriculture industry. One that stood out to me immediately detailed the effects of this industry on the environment, including deforestation, species extinction, and pollution. This became my chosen topic for an argumentative essay due in one of my classes, and I quickly dove further into discovery of the impacts humans have on the world around us. It was one of the first truly introspective periods of my life, where I began to question everything from the food I ate, to the clothes I wore, to the vacations my family took.

I'd always had an interest in science, mainly biology, and decided to pursue this, in congruence with environmental conservation, in college. At Auburn University, I earned a Bachelor of Science in Organismal Biology, with a concentration in Conservation and Biodiversity. In many classes, I had the opportunity to research more deeply the environmental issues I found most pressing. I did a presentation project on plastic pollution, essays on ocean acidification and the animal agriculture industry, and put together a mini-seminar on seagrass beds and their potential to act as carbon sinks. Everything I learned through these projects and through classes continued to fuel my desire to be an environmental steward by profession.

During my time at Auburn, I gained a special appreciation for plants- a group of organisms that often goes unnoticed and understudied. A direct line from botany, I also became interested in fungi, as these kingdoms are inextricably linked. Animals are complex and exciting and incredibly important, but I found my niche in the unsung heroes. I quickly realized the organisms I was taught the least about in high school were among the most important in the balance of ecology. Fungi are the decomposers, creating from dead matter the necessary nutrients that plants, the primary producers, need to sustain us all. My undergraduate studies at Auburn opened up a world of discovery I was sure I wanted to continue.

During my junior year of college, I joined Dr. Courtney Leisner's plant biology lab to gain valuable research experience in botany. I was inspired by the dedication the researchers in my department had to the intricacies that exist in molecular botany. The Leisner lab explored blueberry genomics with an overarching goal of developing food crops resistant to climate effects. I gained incredible appreciation for the effort and resources that go into molecular work and discovering genetic qualities about species that ultimately aid our effort to persist and survive in climate change.

After graduation in 2021, I had a few master's programs in mind. A school high on my list was in Hawai'i. I had already planned to take an academic break before pursuing my master's degree, so I decided to move out to O'ahu in the meantime. I loved everything about it- the culture, the perfect weather, the pristine beaches, the lush mountains, and, of course, the biodiversity. Plants really do reign supreme on these islands. There are few animals, mostly birds, but also boar, mongooses, and chickens (all introduced by humans). And the Hawaiian

government does an excellent job of mitigating the introduction of further species that might be problematic to the island's ecology. The focus on plants was fine by me, and hours turned into days as I explored the many botanical gardens and mountain hikes the island had to offer.

I got a job at a local cooperative called Kokua Market. I was a cashier, but, as co-ops do, Kokua ran primarily on the work of volunteers and local farms. The name Kokua, meaning aid, giving, and mutual assistance, was fitting. The store took in locally grown produce from all over the islands. I saw more varieties of bananas, tomatoes, avocados, and mangos than I ever thought existed. I learned about plants that native Polynesians have used as medicine and food for hundreds of years. I also got to learn how to process and cook these plants in important cultural dishes.

Throughout this time, I began to see man's impact on the environment from yet another perspective. While we have caused significant damage in many ways, humans also have a rich and colorful history of existing with nature respectfully. This can be seen in indigenous communities all over the world, historically and presently. Ethnobotany became a key component in my educational desires, as I realized we don't have to be Earth's antagonist. Maybe we don't have to find ways to protect the environment *despite* humans.

When I came across Evergreen State College in my search for graduate programs, the Environmental Studies degree stood out to me for its interdisciplinary and holistic approach to education. I believe this master's degree would allow me to have a truly multi-faceted approach to environmental protection and sustainability. I want to further my education in a place that puts equal value on modern science, like the molecular work I performed in college, and indigenous knowledge that I've begun to experience in the real world. In my professional life, I want to be well-versed in combining these to create tangible change using policy and law. Our most pressing environmental issues like climate change, deforestation, soil degradation, worsening natural disasters, and species extinction are all linked by common threads. The world needs environmental stewards who are equipped with the ability to see these connections, communicate them with larger audiences, and enact actionable change. I believe an environmental studies degree from Evergreen State College would provide this sort of education and preparation.