

Dear Evergreen State College,

I am deeply interested in attending your Masters Program for Environmental Studies. I have previously graduated from ESC in 2020 with a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Studies. Since then I have been working mainly as a Park Aide at Washington State Parks doing a large amount of grounds maintenance and interpretive events, as well as working with a team to develop our interpretive outreach program geared around environmental education and stewardship. My main interest is in plant ecology, particularly looking at plant resilience and adaptation to climate change. Fire regimes and how they affect plant communities and ecosystems are also a large interest of mine.

While pursuing my bachelors degree, I took several extremely interesting classes. One that was surprisingly more interesting than I expected was "What Are Trees For? Forest Ecology and Resource Conflicts" This class dove into the policy side of environmental action, teaching us to identify possible stakeholders in certain issues while also teaching us basic forest ecology and how to identify plants in the winter. I followed this class with the "Forests", "Deserts", and "Field Ecology" classes. "Forests" taught us about all the components in identifying the amount of carbon exchange in a system. This all encompassing view opened my eyes to the role of forest components such as downed woody debris, symbiotic bacteria and fungi, soil chemistry, and epiphytic contributors. We also learned briefly about the role of fire in healthy forest ecosystems and how different approaches might be more effective in different ecosystems. This partly inspired one of my field ecology projects where we monitored the recovery and plant diversity of a known burn sight at the back of ESC. Seeing the obvious increase in species diversity in the burned site stoked my thoughts on the differences between "good fire" and "bad fire" and how these can mean different things applied to different regions.

The Deserts class that I took was another surprise in regards to how much I truly enjoyed learning everything in that class. I have always been drawn to the forest but learning what I did about deserts made me increasingly interested in learning about these fragile ecosystems as well, especially the plant life. There are so many intertwining concepts that I was initially overwhelmed by the number of directions I could go. Studying the overall connection between deserts and forests on the west side of the country is of great interest to me and I feel that plant and ecosystem ecology is key for the type of study I would like to pursue.

Another notable experience is that in the summer of 2017 I traveled to Peru to volunteer for 8 weeks in the Amazon jungle. I stayed at the Panthera Sanctuary on the Madre de Dias and we took many trips out into the jungle to collect trail cam data, create and maintain study trails, and make countless observations about the ecosystem around us. The permanent leaders of the sanctuary had a long term goal of finding evidence that would allow them to request the land be protected by the Peruvian government and, although I'm not sure what the overall outcome was, we did stumble across a family group of South American river otters. Some of the pictures that I was able to get were given to the organizers and I can only hope that they were used for the benefit of the environment. This experience took place just before I continued my studies at ESC and had a large hand in my decision to switch from dance to environmental studies (although I ultimately obtained a degree in both).

As I mentioned previously, my current work as a park aide has brought me even closer to realizing my goals. With my involvement in the interpretation program at the WSPRC my eyes have been opened even more to the values of outreach education and inspiring young people to be stewards of the environment. The agency also has a Stewardship Certification Program which I am eagerly making my way through. With several extended trainings and a culminating stewardship project I am excited to have this opportunity to further my knowledge through my workplace. I look forward to a day where my career embraces this type of stewardship/outreach work.

My main goal with attending Evergreen's masters program is to refresh and further my current knowledge, hone my research techniques and field work, and get started doing the important work that I know is critical in conserving and restoring our current climates and ecosystems. As for why I have chosen Evergreen - it took me seven years out of high school to find a school that taught in a way that I thrived in - Evergreen was it. After the three amazing years I spent there getting my Bachelors, I wouldn't choose any other style of learning. After browsing through the graduate course descriptions, I am ecstatic to dive back into learning and use that experience for the good of the environment. I can only hope that ESC can grant me the opportunity to pursue this dream. I thank you so much for your time and consideration, and I wish you the best as the 2024 school year comes to a close. Hope to see you next year!

Sincerely,  
Shannon Van Duine