

Statement of Purpose_Carrie Smith

I imagine that everyone applying to the Master of Environmental Studies program at Evergreen is doing so because they care about the health of our world and want to do something about the devastating consequences of wide-spread capitalism and settler colonialism. I certainly fall into this category! My specific journey has led me to this application because in addition to wanting to make the world a better place, I am also craving something more personal: after decades working as an architectural designer—a field that feels morally empty and brings me absolutely no joy—I want to feel good about the work I’m doing and I want to find a community of like-minded people.

For me, the link between architecture and environmental studies (and also my Physics undergraduate studies) is that I’ve always been interested in the world around me. I decided to study architecture because I had the amazing opportunity to travel around the world for several years in my early 20s (playing bass in a rock n roll band—a story for another time!). During this period of exploration, I was struck by the way that different societies and cultures expressed their specific values through their built environments. It was fascinating to see how something intangible could manifest itself in a building or city design. After settling down in Los Angeles post-travels, I decided to get a Master of Architecture degree.

In the years since, however, I’ve found the practice of architecture to be deeply unfulfilling. I graduated in 2009 and because of the recession at that time, I never had the opportunity to explore my initial interests. Instead, I was tossed into a turbulent workforce where—in order to make ends meet—my job became selecting marble countertops for wealthy couples or designing display racks for luxury retail brands. I found myself living in NYC, dreaming of establishing a connection to land and caring for it in a relationship of reciprocity, when the pandemic started and I lost my job. This was my cue to try something new. I moved to the Puget Sound region to be near friends, quickly falling in love with the area and I dove into forging a new relationship to the land.

To deepen this relationship, I started a restoration project on the land where I currently live. This provided me with time outdoors, getting to know my new neighbors (both flora and fauna), connecting to the earth by getting my hands dirty and soaking in its unique smells, and learning from nature and the passing of time. After starting this restoration project, it became clear that I had much to learn and that the scale of degradation to this area meant that this work can’t be done alone.

I jumped at the opportunity to become a Washington Native Plant Society (WNPS) Native Plant Steward last Fall, which has fueled my desire to learn more about the practice of restoration ecology. The 10-week training was a fulfilling and amazing experience, and I am grateful to have learned from esteemed instructors and to have connected with other native plant nerds. But I want more! I want to dive deep into specific restoration techniques and planning. I want to know how we can do restoration work that doesn’t demonize and criminalize our unhoused neighbors who are frequently occupying the spaces we are trying to restore. I want to grapple with what it means to be doing restoration work in an environment that has been irrevocably altered by my settler-colonist ancestors. I want to help others become interested in this work because, as the abolitionist educator and organizer Mariame Kaba has noted, “everything worthwhile is done with other people.”

Subsequently, I’ve volunteered with the Olympia-based Native Plant Salvage Project and with local WNPS chapters on their plant salvage events. Doing the work and meeting the people devoted to doing this ecological restoration has been key in confirming that this is the work that finally feels fulfilling to me. When I’m digging up blackberry rootballs and chatting about favorite ecology-focussed podcasts, or tenderly potting a salvaged licorice fern, or attending a lecture on how the conservation of endemic species has been hampered by borders and definitions, I am happiest. I’m at a point where I could trudge through the rest of my life at a job that is predicated on resource extraction and unfettered development, or take a pause and question what it is

that I'm doing with my labor. I have found postings for positions that are my "dream job," such as the Restoration Project Manager for the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, or a Natural Areas Program Assistant Ecologist with the Washington State DNR. I have neither the education or experience to qualify for these jobs and I'm hoping to change that with this application.

So why Evergreen? I'm attracted by the types of thesis projects your past alumni have researched, like Katherine Hall's "Recreation Trail Analysis Comparing the Impact of Social and Formal Trails on Trees in Forest Habitat." I love the interdisciplinary aspects of these types of queries: how do humans impact our environment, and how can we do it in a respectful and reciprocal way that isn't based in an extractive mindset? Additionally—because I am an experiential learner and things make more sense to me when practiced and mistakes and successes are analyzed—I know I would benefit greatly from a program that provides and prioritizes internships and instructors who are professionals in the field. Lastly, after being in the working world for almost 20 years, Evergreen's non-traditional evaluation system makes a lot of sense to me. I prefer to have honest bi-lateral evaluations—which reduce hierarchies and power dynamics—than a grading system that encourages conformity and ableism. I would be thrilled to be accepted into the MES program at Evergreen and I am thankful for your time and consideration!