Chelsea Waddell, MES 2015

Chelsea Waddell believes strongly in the importance of getting your foot in the door with a job, agency, or opportunity that you’re interested in. Some of her strongest advice for current and prospective MES students is to make those professional connections as early and as often as possible. She recommends volunteering (though she acknowledges this can be very challenging for graduate students), interning, joining professional societies, taking short-term and contract positions you might want, and reaching out to the leaders of the fields you want to work in. Not all of these are easy options for graduate students, but they are opportunities available to students who join the MES program.

Chelsea Waddell joined the MES program in 2013 after several years of medical research experience working in labs designing HIV and tuberculosis vaccines. She came to MES to change her career and get the field experience she describes as her “happy place.” When thinking back on her experience at Evergreen, she mentions the multiple relationships she built during her time at Evergreen. She worked as a TA in some undergraduate programs, supporting students in both statistics and ornithology. She also served as both the statistics tutor and writing tutor for the MES program, supporting her fellow students in building skills in these areas. Her fondest memory of her time in MES is doing her thesis research, catching frogs in wetlands just south of Olympia. Chelsea studied Oregon spotted frogs with the support of one biologist from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and one MES faculty member. Her thesis, entitled *The Oregon Spotted Frog (*Rana Pretiosa*) in Lowland Western Washington, USA: A Population, Parentage & Non-Breeding Habitat Analysis* investigating “the spatial relationship between breeding and non-breeding habitat utilization pattersn of adult Oregon spotted forgs by using genetic sampling for one small population” at West Rocky Prairie, just south of Olympia (Waddell, 2015).

In addition to her research experience, Chelsea loved the interdisciplinary aspects of the MES program, and the focus on seminars. In her current work as the Regional Wildlife, Botany and Fisheries Data Coordinator for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), she regularly utilizes the skills she developed in Evergreen’s interdisciplinary learning environment as she works to collaborate with a variety of partners from all over Oregon and Washington. In her role she coordinates observation and survey data for sensitive, threatened and endangered plant and animal species from hundreds of partners as well as BLM biologists. While her work is largely inside working with various databases, she still gets time outside in the field – work she considers necessary to keep her knowledge of data collection methods current.

In her role collaboration is key. Chelsea occasionally pulls out one of her old reading assignments, The Interdisciplinary Toolbox to help her make sure she’s facilitating meetings and conversations effectively.

Chelsea’s advice to current MES students, especially those who may feel unsure about the utility of a degree in Environmental Studies, is to keep trucking and do what you love. It can often take a lot of drive and persistence to follow your passions, and opportunities might come in different forms that you imagine. If you can apply that mindset and utilize the skills you’ve learned, then opportunities will come forward. It’s also important to keep in mind that a master’s degree doesn’t mean you can go from zero to 100 immediately. You need to set realistic goals for yourself, take advantage of the opportunities that come up (conferences, internships, volunteerism, networking), and not become so focused on one goal that you don’t realize what great skills you’re gaining on the way.

This applies to work in the program, too. Some students come in with a thesis project in mind immediately, and they can miss out on the uniqueness of the program by being hyper-focused on that one research goal. Chelsea’s thoughts on MES: “It’s a super unique program, and I’m really proud of being a Greener. I run into fellow Greeners often. To be successful, you need to be a self-directed learner, and to be decisive. There are so many open doors, you can get lost. Be a sponge. Take in as much as you can, and actually do the reading. There may be times when it won’t feel important, but that might be the stuff that ends up being the most relevant.”