Sarah Bilizekian Essays

**Cassandra Fricke:**

My interest in the natural environment was sparked at a young age. As a kid, I was exposed to many educational programs at different parks, where I learned about different wildlife, plants, and the relationship between humans and these species. However, as I grew older, I discovered more about the harms associated with poor environmental practices. This has instilled in me a sense of stewardship and desire to educate those who are unaware of what is going on in the world around them. It is my ambition to be able to pass on knowledge about the wonders the natural world has to offer, especially to a young audience. Kids still look at everything with innocent and appreciative eyes, and so I believe this is when we can leave a lasting impact on them. Ideally, after graduation from the Masters in Environmental Studies Program at Evergreen State College, I would love to connect with children and their families through work as a park ranger or naturalist in a national park, or in a museum or nature center setting.

Through earning my Bachelor’s in Environmental Policy and Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, I have taken extensive courses both in the environmental policy and science realms. These classes have given me a sound background knowledge of environmental issues, as well as their social and environmental justice implications.

I have also been fortunate enough to partake in an internship with the Clean Water Action Council of Northeast Wisconsin (CWAC). This internship has provided me with many opportunities to connect with the public on pertinent environmental concerns in the greater northeast Wisconsin area. While employed with CWAC, I took part in calling the organization’s members to urge them to act on particular issues, such as submitting public comments to town boards. I worked alongside two other interns in creating a “weekly update” that was emailed out to members every Tuesday. These updates included summaries of, and links to, pressing environmental issues being covered in the local news, responsive actions to take, and relevant public events to attend. Additionally, I attended a local farmer’s market in which I was able to interact with the public about our organization’s goals and areas of advocacy.

While I have gathered a rather strong understanding of the politics behind environmental issues, I wish to pursue public education of these issues because the people, in the end, are the ones who have a voice and drive change. The Master of Environmental Studies program at Evergreen State College is an ideal program for me to achieve this, with its interdisciplinary incorporation of natural and social sciences with public policy and environmental humanities. I hope to help drive a united effort to protect and enhance our access to the natural environment. To be able to shed light on environmental issues in a way that has a lasting impact on the general population would help me pay it forward, as was done for me when I was young.

**Gina McCrackin:**

In 2014, the chaos surrounding the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis, occurring just forty minutes away from my home, captured headlines across the nation. I was struck by the anomaly of my childhood, one of being so inspired by the natural world around me, to then understanding the sometimes-catastrophic human implications of mismanaging the natural environment. The same environment that appeared so unspoiled and spirited could also be neglected, abused, and ultimately responsible for death. It was through this experience that I had grown to grasp that there are certain populations, demographics, and identities that disproportionately bear the burden of environmental problems. This understanding has framed my education- one focused on justice as a tool for addressing the social costs of environmental tragedies. One that seeks to find and address the intersectionality between environmental and social justice.

Throughout my early undergraduate career, I learned constantly of the heroic and road-paving conservationists, such as Aldo Leopold and Theodore Roosevelt, whose work was a catalyst for the movement I’ve devoted my scholarship to. However, there was something anachronistic about learning of these white, male figures who mirrored the men I had learned about in colonialist history lessons in high school. Although I respect their contributions in my field, I yearned for introduction to the diverse, underrepresented voices within the environmental movement. I acquainted myself with the professors at my institution who shaped lessons around mavericks, such as Majora Carter and Winona LaDuke. It was by way of these lessons, and my conflicting life experiences in Michigan, that my academic path became rooted in justice, in the advocation of a healthy environment that included a thriving human component.

Across my interdisciplinary experiences, there stood a constant. I realized it wasn’t so much the material work I was doing that drove my passion for continuing my studies. It was the arena in which I’d been given a platform that I felt most empowered. It was the advocacy that my positions allowed me to pursue that shaped my person. This is when I’d realized my graduate study goals. I aim to study systems of social-environmental oppression, use my findings to inform policy, and advocate for community needs that aren’t being met, all while working within a social-environmental justice framework. Evergreen’s holistic MES program will give me the tools I need to reach this goal. My confidence in this derives from the collaborative faculty pool at Evergreen, coursework diversity, and environmental justice internship opportunities, like the Sustainability in Prisons Project.

Upon graduation, I will continue working in the field of environmental justice. Ideally, I’d be in a position that would allow me to work where social-environmental issues are at the forefront. I’d use my education to engage & provide resources to vulnerable communities and come up with viable solutions to environmental problems. Advocacy and environmental justice are the pinnacle of my passions. I will work assiduously to see projects through, to aid in the rebuilding of communities, and empower local citizens throughout the process.

**Jack Bennett**

 Greetings,

 As an environmental advocate, I'm applying for the Sara Ann Bilezikian Fellowship scholarship for my graduate studies at the Evergreen State College.

 If selected, I will use funds provided in this scholarship for environmental protection work in the local area of Washington State. I will be conducting research on soil quality and impacts in the regional area of Olympia, WA. I have a soils and geology background which will be applied to this work. Once, research is completed, a formally published thesis will hopefully fill in holes in data, and benefit environmental advocacy.

 I am an environmental advocate, because I've worked in the environmental and education field. I educated the public on the importance of preserving the Mt. St. Helens monument region with the Mt. St. Helens Institute. I also restored native plants by, hand, and by directing groups through the conservation corps in Seattle.

 My project plan for my research project is to first conduct preliminary literary research on the soils of Washington state, specifically in Olympia. Next, I will write a work plan for research. Then, I will collect data on the soils of the region that are missing from national data resources using standard protocol. Adaptations to the work plan likely will occur over the start of research. This research will go towards providing plans for cleaning pollution sites of contaminants, following legislation to keep infrastructure from building on hazardous sites, and looking to the future of alternative energy sources, instead of using fossil fuels.

 Currently, there is policy that outlines how waste should be disposed of statewide (Department of Ecology 2019). However, these environmental policies are subject to change, and filling in the data gaps will be useful for environmental advocacy. Hopefully, my soil quality thesis can be used to impact state policy on waste disposal.

 As an environmental advocate, I voluntarily, conducted soil research in Moss Landing California, to look at clay properties of soil in a restored wetland. The preliminary research from this project is provided within my general graduate school application to Evergreen State College (Bennett 2020). Published research on impacts of industry pollutants in the ecosystem are typically referenced in government policy (DOE 2019).

 As Climate Change is an imminent threat, alternative sources of energy are becoming more necessary. Thesis work that provides public understanding of the impacts of pollutants on the ecosystem, along with supporting current soil quality research could influence alternative energy work. Additionally, soils research will add to current data locally to protect communities from potentially dangerous, either landslide prone or polluted, earth materials.

 Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing back.

 Regards,

 Jack

**Elizabeth Torres**

I grew up in a migrant community, in a family of five, were Spanish was the dominant language. My mother suffered from two heart attacks when I was in elementary school, as a result my father was the only breadwinner. He was a laborer and earned minimum wage, our family managed to get by through government programs that provided low-income housing and food stamps. The street we lived on divided three gangs and there was often a rival drive-by. School lockdowns were common; in the fourth grade, I recall the word wall and rubbish bin becoming our classroom restroom after being in a lockdown for over eight hours.

From a young age I knew trauma. Communities of color, people with lower incomes, and indigenous people are always on the frontlines. The climate and environmental crisis being no exception, which makes existing health and economic disparities worse. A lot of my life, has been spent organizing and rallying against the injustices that exist globally. In high school, I was recruited to form part of UCLA IDEA’s Council of Youth Research and began reading graduate level theory that addressed the activist work I was doing. In college, I chose coursework that allowed me to better analyze the trauma I had experience first-hand. I knew the violence surrounding me, stemmed deeper than the individuals themselves, and was imbedded in structural violence. Upon my college graduation I began doing public-service work; only to find that the same systems that challenged oppression and sought out peace, lacked a model of peace and community within their own organization. I began to critically reflect on organizational practices. Furthermore, I critically looked within my personal practices. I questioned if I was honoring peace in my everyday life or contributing to cycles of violence. Simultaneously, I was learning about the spiritual practice of Ahimsa in my yoga teacher training. A practice of doing the least harm possible with the ultimate goal of nonviolence in every act. Ahimsa changed the way I chose to live; I learned to honor all life as something sacred and began to incorporate spiritual conscious into my decision making. On my healing journey I found that when you heal yourself, you heal your ancestors, and future generations. I found myself to be part of the solution, a solution that seemed unattainable before.

As a conscious collective we have the power to reverse the destruction of the environment and our communities. Currently complex ecosystems, in ancient old growth forests, that have sustained life for thousands of years are in danger of extinction. My time at Evergreen will be used to hone in on my understanding of intersecting issues to better equip myself in power and capacity for a movement of racial, economic, and environmental justice. I will continue to push for sovereignty, resilience, and self-sufficiency in our communities so that future generations may thrive. I commit to a lifetime of protection and restoration of old-growth forests, by fostering community beyond humans and collectively rebalancing ecosystems.

**Danika Davis:**

My strong passion for environmental stewardship is clearly exampled by my work and volunteer history. I have held multiple positions that have allowed me to gain valuable knowledge and skills in protecting ecological integrity including Noxious Weed management, Natural Resources work, Entomological Pest detection and Endangered Species management. Between these temporary employment periods I have spent hundreds of hours volunteering for the JBLM Fish and Wildlife program engaging in numerous projects from Oak Stand preservation, threatened species habitat management, and fire ecology. Both my professional and volunteer experience have helped me to better understand the need for clearer environmental laws and policies in addition to the lack of understanding held by the general public. The laws hold equal importance to their clarity not only for the obvious reason of comprehension but also for incentive to remember and follow them. It is my desire to bridge this obvious gap between the needs of the natural environmental and the general public’s awareness and erudition. My experience has taught me that comprehension more often leads to compassion and when it comes to matters of the environment, compassion is more likely to lead to behavioral changes. It is only through change that people can exist peacefully with the environment. We will never have a perfect exchange with our natural world but we can achieve a better one that will not only lead to land, species and resource conservation but could also provide more social equality and protect human rights. Helping to mold a safer environment for both people and animals is the only way we as a species can hope to sustain our existence. I am confident that continuing my education, volunteering and political awareness is the best way for me to advocate for those who cannot campaign for themselves, people and nature alike. I want to continue serving the earth and it’s occupants; I only wish to do so in a more impactful way.

**Dan Alden**

Worked twelve years with the U.S. Forest Service, seven National Forests in five different western states. When my parents moved to King County from Richland, I hated it. Rain, moss, trees, and saltwater. Came to appreciate the West (wet) Side. Felt a deep spiritual connection with forests, mountains, rivers, the Sound, and especially wildlife. After graduation from the U.W. with a degree in Anthropology, couldn’t find work so I got a job as a Backcountry Ranger in the Olympic N.P. then worked trail crew for the Olympic National Forest. Was on a Wildlife crew in the Mt. St. Helens blast zone when I got work as an archaeologist for the Federal Government for the first-time doing survey for Section 106 compliance. Kept on getting promoted, ending up as a GS-9 crew leader. Worked with stake holders, wrote plans, did public outreach. Best thing I ever did was a NAGPRA repatriation of human remains collected from an Eyak site in Prince William Sound in the ‘20s. I dug a hole and put them back. Did other things with the Forest Service: wildland firefighting, tree planting, burned area emergency rehabilitation, and contract administration. Speak good Spanish thanks to my mom and first girlfriend so they put me in charge of Hispanic silviculture crews. Spent a winter in Michoacán, Mexico and was amazed how many folks I met had worked as migrant workers in Eastern Washington. The mountains and prairies in Central Mexico were environmental analogs to where I grew up. I felt aggravated about the poverty, injustice, and environmental devastation I saw but was always mindful of the kindness of the people and the beauty of the land. When I saw trees covered with Monarch butterflies I first thought the pines were covered with crown fire, then I realized it was thousands of mariposas. It guts me that last month another manager at that butterfly reserve was assassinated by illegal loggers. We want to save the environment, we got to protect the people who live there. Both my maternal grandparents worked at Hanford and died of rare thyroid cancer. I am a Downwinder myself. There is a lake in Okanogan County with my last name, given by my great grandfather who homesteaded there in 1877. The program at Evergreen speaks to me. The natural world needs our help and I feel duty bound to do something. After my car accident, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation sent me to a Technical college to get a professional certificate in Geographic Information System. I got a job at Green River as an Adjunct/ GIS Tutor, but couldn’t keep it without a Master’s. I loved teaching, sharing what I know with the students, but I also learned from them. My brain damage means I know less than most folks, not more. Just happen to be an idiot savant regarding GIS. Nothing would make happier than to take MES classes and get an internship with a state or private agency. Thanks.

Derek Burke:

My academic journey has helped me discover a passion for everything our beautiful state has to offer. I have found fulfillment from volunteering with various organizations such as Ride the Willapa, Friends of Capitol Forest and the Centralia College Outdoor Recreation Program. I have had the opportunity to teach other students about sustainable environmental practices, advocating for policy changes and practicing “leave no trace”.

These opportunities have given me the experience of working with like-minded individuals who care about a sustainable future. I have had the privilege of building a network of people who work closely with the Department of Natural Resources, the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, Centralia College and our local community. I have obtained the necessary skills through these volunteer opportunities that I hope to leverage in my MES graduate program.

My passion for the outdoors and dedication to developing sustainable environmental practices will be my focus while working on my graduate degree. I hope to use the knowledge that I have obtained in my undergraduate program to further develop my project management skills and advocate for environmental policy changes. My background in business and communication will be leveraged in my future career working for the State of Washington.

The MES Program will provide me with the tools and resources to further my skillset so that I may be well equipped to tackle the social and environmental issues we face here in Washington State. Upon completion of the MES program, I plan on transitioning into a role within the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission. I believe that a combination of excellent leadership and education will play an important role in the operations, maintenance, improvement and protection of Washington's cherished state parks. Planning our future and understanding the importance of advocating for policy change is only one part of a much larger picture. I feel that my passion for education, environmental sustainability and commitment to positive change will help me further my career to help future generations enjoy our beautiful state land.