Daron Williams (MES 2016) is currently the Community Conservation Manager at Capitol Land Trust (CLT). In his role, he oversees projects involving restoration, public access and environmental education. In his time with CLT he has already held a few other titles, starting as “intern” during his first year in the MES program.

Daron graduated from the University of Washington with a BA in Political Science, and gained a variety of field and technical skills through a post-baccalaureate associate’s degree in water resources from Spokane Community College, where he also earned a certificate in Geographic Information Systems (GIS). When looking into graduate programs, Daron knew that what happened in the classroom was only part of what would make him a competitive graduate, and so he was attracted to MES because of the evening classes and programmatic focus on internship opportunities and student-driven learning.

Daron hit the ground running in MES, taking his first elective in the summer before officially matriculating, traveling to Fiji for two weeks to learn about adaptation and management of the south pacific island as climate change dramatically changes the geography, in a course called Climate Change and Sustainability in the Fiji Islands. Once the fall quarter started, Daron leveraged his previous GIS experience and approached the instructor for the GIS course to become the first GIS tutor for that course (a student position that still exists). Through this position, Daron met a future coworker at CLT who announced an internship position available to MES students. Daron applied and got the internship. He mentions that working for a non-profit wasn’t really his plan, but it seemed like a good learning opportunity at the time, and he decided to go for it.

In the internship, Daron, who is originally from Deer Park just north of Spokane, got a “crash course” in identifying west side species. He has since taken what he learned in that role and applied it to his current work with CLT where he regularly performs assessments on potential restoration sites to develop and implement restoration plans and apply for grant funding through the Washington Recreation and Conservation Office, as well as through private foundations.

Daron’s thesis, entitled *Managing Active Forest Lands for Increased Water Retention: A New Approach for Protecting Summer Water Supplies in the Western United States*, focused on active forest lands (those that are harvested and replanted) and investigating management options for reducing surface water flows and subsequent erosion. He worked with the University of Washington Pack Experimental Forest where bioswales had recently been installed, and monitored soil moisture levels. This work concluded that bioswales in active forestry lands could be an effective method for retaining moisture and reducing erosion on some soil types.

“At the end of the day, it wasn’t my thesis that got me a job” Daron says. His advice for current and incoming MES students is networking. He very much encourages students to take on internships, reach out to community members for informational interviews, and to volunteer with the organizations that they’re interested in connecting with. He feels strongly that hands-on experience is vitally important, and his own work at building relationships within the community was what led him to the position he is in today at CLT. “There are lots of opportunities to make connections as a graduate student that you may not have afterward” he says, including internships that you must be a current student to take advantage of. Daron acknowledges that he is lucky to be in the position he was – capable of taking on an unpaid internship – as he knows not every student can do this, but he encourages students to think of the ways they can get hands-on work experience, especially if they can gain elective credit toward their MES.

When asked about his advice for students who are concerned about the job market for environmentalists, and how to stay hopeful when our current environmental challenges feel so huge, he says that students should focus their energy into the local community, “it can seem small, given what we’re facing, but [getting involved at the local level] is a chance to build skills and make change.” He also points out that many small organizations are growing, and this is an area graduates can look to for jobs in the future.

Daron is of the mind that people with environmental degrees will be in demand as challenges continue to grow and compound (like the effects of climate change). Washington is one of many states investing in environmental fields. Graduates should have hope that their skills and experience will be needed because “the challenges that our environment is facing aren’t going to go away.”