

Dear Svitek Family,

When I hit a financial bump in the road, it is easy for me to become stressed out. Luckily, I have always had my mother to remind me that if I really want something, there is way to make it happen. It is through her advice that I came to you when I couldn't figure out how to pay for travel, food and gear expenses. I can't thank you enough for the financial assistance you gave me. Affording my internship would likely not have been possible without you.

During the Fall 2010 semester, I participated in a field program through a non-profit organization called Northwest Connections, located in the beautiful Swan Valley of Montana. This small NGO provides educational field semesters, conducts field research and aids in community conservation discussions. The program I did was called "Landscape and Livelihood" and focused on community-based conservation in rural areas. I enjoyed the program, the people, and the location so much that I couldn't resist an offer to return for a summer field internship.

The formal internship consisted of two main research projects; collecting grizzly bear DNA and surveying streams for fish DNA. However, due to the nature of the organization, every moment was a unique learning opportunity. While out hiking for grizzly hair samples, my supervisor Adam taught myself and the other two interns the local flora and fauna and described various aspects of biogeography and ecology. He is also an expert tracker, and the three of us became well-versed in tracking as well.

The grizzly bear DNA project is conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey, headed by biologist Kate Kendall and based out of Glacier National Park. The project, formally called the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) Grizzly Bear DNA Project, estimates the population of grizzly bears in a given study area through the collection of DNA samples. In this case, the study area was 8.5 million acres of land surrounding Glacier-Waterton National Parks. Bear fur is caught on barbed wire that is stapled to trees when bears rub their backs against them. Field biotechnicians (like myself) collect that hair and send it to the field station in Glacier where it is passed on to DNA labs. The study is relatively high profile, and is necessary to get an accurate description of the viability of one of the last remaining grizzly populations in the United States.



The fish study required a bit more advanced technology. Northwest Connections bought a stream shocker, which is essentially a generator backpack that emits electrical current through a probe into stream waters. The point of this is to stun fish in the stream long enough for them to be netted and collected in a bucket. At first, this might sound ridiculous, but there is a perfectly legitimate reason behind it.

The westslope cutthroat is a species of trout that spends its life between the headwater streams and the main channel of a river. They are native to the Swan Valley, but have begun to hybridize with the non-native brook trout, introduced in order to “enhance” Montana’s booming fishing tourism industry. The brook trout is able to out-compete the westslope cutthroat, which is harmful enough to the population; however, the two species are able to interbreed, diluting the gene pool of the westslope cutthroats. My job was to collect their DNA in the form of fin clips for analysis.

Your generosity enabled me to participate in this rewarding internship, gaining valuable career experience and making lasting connections with work references. I also made some amazing friends and saw unbelievable places and animals (grizzlies, wolves, elk and even a mountain lion!). Thank you again for affording me this unreal experience. I honestly cannot thank you enough.

Sincerely,

Sean Donovan