

Given the water consumption habits that humanity has adopted, one would think that freshwater is an abundant resource. We often take water for granted, simply turning on the tap and using a constant flow to wash dishes, taking long showers after a tiring day, or watering the front yard for lush green grass. However, water's importance extends far beyond daily conveniences. It is the foundation of a healthy planet and vital to the well-being of countless ecosystems. I must admit that I, too, have overlooked the role water plays until the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way I expected to start my college experience. The lack of an in-person experience led me to pursue a more atypical career path. My love for water was ignited through training to be a whitewater rafting guide on the Arkansas River. This new found summer gig motivated me to pursue a major in Environmental Sciences with an emphasis in conservation, sustainability, and natural resources by enrolling in Oregon State University's Ecampus where I have just completed my junior year. Although my path to completion has slowed down because I am significantly funding my own education, I am taking my first steps towards working in water science, and my career interests and goals are solidifying with every new experience. Through my work I want to contribute to a paradigm shift in the ways that humans consume and think about water.

Throughout history, younger generations have consistently been the catalysts for social change so I recognize the significance of building young people's knowledge about the conservation and sustainability of water resources. I currently have the honor of interning with a non-profit called River Science. My internship with River Science has involved several steps contributing to their main goal of creating an internship program for recently graduated high school students. I began by learning how to take water samples to measure dissolved oxygen, alkalinity, hardness, pH, and metals. After becoming proficient in these field and lab protocols, I then helped establish the internship program with River Science. Fast forward to today where I now supervise River Science's first intern. Together we are working alongside the fish hatchery in Pueblo, Colorado to monitor water quality in 32 of their holding ponds as well as three established river watch sites in Canon City, Colorado. The ultimate goal of this internship program is to present data to the hatchery and provide suggestions on how to improve water quality for higher fish yields. Additionally, we aim to monitor and collect data at the established river sites and give this data to another non-profit called River Watch. The development of this program is not only setting students up for success by providing real world science application, but also creating a model for the continuous involvement of younger generations to come into the world of water.

Working with River Science has enhanced my workforce skills and helped me discern next steps in my career path. One short-term goal I have is to complete my bachelor's degree in environmental science in the spring of 2026, or sooner if I can, and obtain a certificate in Geographic Information Systems (GIS). The certification, in addition to my degree, would not only improve my data analysis and communication skills but also is a sought after skill that would set me apart from others when applying to be a part of the environmental science workforce. After completing my degree and GIS certificate, I plan to apply to Americorps programs, or other water conservation oriented organizations, to expand my knowledge and skills. In the long run I would like to gain enough hands-on experience to prepare me for success when pursuing a Master's degree in a related water conservation field. My overarching goal is to find a meaningful job where I can contribute to the improvement of water conservation and environmental restoration in a hands-on way with a focus on Colorado rivers.

Humanity's consumption habits paint a picture of abundance and prosperity, yet the thought of freshwater being a finite resource brings some fear to mind. My academic and professional journey thus far not only reflects a growing awareness of reality but also changes my fear into determination. My internship with River Science is not just about collecting water samples. It is about understanding the

importance of freshwater to ecosystems and teaching that importance to future generations. I know that I am just one person in a world of many, but I believe that I have the power to support change when it comes to involving younger generations in understanding water science and conserving this natural resource. To have a thriving future, environmental education needs to be prioritized, challenging conversations about conservation need to be had, and every person should be included.