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Watershed group's internships bring lasting benefits

Jennifer DeMoss Guest columnist

At the Watershed Council, we like to acknowledge how members of our community and beyond contribute to our mission of preserving Northern Michigan's heritage and waters. Interns are a key part of our work. Throughout each summer, they perform shoreline surveys, inventory road/stream crossings to protect aquatic wildlife habitat, assess permit applications, assist volunteers with lake and stream monitoring, and so much more.

Some of these interns have been your kids, your neighbors, or your students. Some have applied from further afield to gain practical experience. They've benefitted the Watershed Council with their hard work and generosity and enriched their own lives in the process. This month, we're telling stories from a few of our interns about how caring for our waters has shaped their lives.

Evan Joneson came to the Watershed Council as an intern for our Watershed Protection Team this year. He'll be a senior at the University of Michigan this fall. Like many college students, Joneson was required to gain practical experience in his chosen fields — conservation biology and ecology — before graduating. He chose the Watershed Council as a way to test the waters before making a career choice.

So far, Joneson has used different kinds of equipment and software to help measure water flow and quality and report those findings to stakeholders. He's even working on an independent project to measure whether changes to a road/stream crossing on Minnehaha Creek have resulted in a healthier environment for aquatic species. The fieldwork was exactly what Joneson was seeking from the internship.

"I guess I would say the one thing that surprised me from this internship was the amount of community interaction," he said. "In lake and stream monitoring we're working with volunteers the whole time. I think that community involvement with environmental issues is important, so it's a welcome surprise."

Jonesson values working with experts in a professional setting during his internship. He believes that his experiences at the Watershed Council will improve his chances of contributing quality work at his chosen career.

Sophie Goodnough is our second 2021 Watershed Protection Team intern. Goodnough will be entering her junior year at Western Michigan University this fall. Because of pandemic restrictions, she didn't have in-person lab classes in 2020.

"At the Watershed Council, I'm finally getting to apply what I've learned over the past couple of years to the real world," she said.

So far, Goodnough has done what any full-time employee might do, such as assessing stream bank erosion and evaluating road/stream crossings. One of her favorite experiences has been habitat assessments: monitoring the factors that might support or impede the health of wildlife in water bodies.

Goodnough has already learned that she wants a job that will give her time in the field working on ecology and water quality, not a desk job.

"I want to be a direct influence for environmental change," she said. "I'm hearing about everything that (monitoring programs coordinator) Caroline and (associate director) Jen Buchanan have done, and it's amazing."

Daniel Gonzalez was a policy and advocacy intern at the Watershed Council in 2018. He graduated from Miami University in Ohio in 2019 and is currently attending a master of public affairs program at Indiana University as well as working for the Environmental Defense Fund Climate Corps in the New York City Mayor's Office of Sustainability.

Gonzalez said that his Watershed Council internship was his favorite, and it helped him learn about the role of community engagement in creating effective policies. He conducted surveys of residents and local government officials regarding proposed septic system regulations during the internship and was surprised to see the different responses put forth by community members.

"The experience made me certain that I wanted to do large-scale environmental policy work that would progress us towards a more environmentally-friendly future," he said.

Gonzalez still volunteers with the Watershed Council from time to time, performing data analysis for watershed policy director Grenetta Thomassey.

"I think that the Watershed Council is a really good example of what it means to have a small group of people work well together," said Gonzalez. "There's no separation between the science and policy efforts. It's all about trying to holistically protect our watersheds and work for the common good."

Our interns contribute to the Watershed Council, and to Northern Michigan's waters, in so many ways. We're always excited to welcome them to our family and to send them home with cherished memories. Keep an eye on our social media in the coming months to look for ways to support our interns far into the future.

Jennifer DeMoss is the communications director for Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.