

During my undergrad at Northwestern University, I was a crusader for the environment. I spent two spring breaks volunteering with The Nature Conservancy in Puget Sound, Washington and at the Disney Wilderness Preserve in Florida. Both of these trips were part of a program called Alternative Spring Break in which undergrads travel throughout the U.S. to do week-long service projects. I pulled invasive plant species, like the nefarious scotch broom, and helped build a “butterfly bar,” so butterflies could pollinate native plant species. I also led an Alternative Spring Break trip to Land Between The Lakes, a national recreation area on the Tennessee-Kentucky border. My team and I toiled at one of the environmental education centers so that high school students could learn about local ecology. As a member of Northwestern’s environmental student group, I organized a campus-wide competition to reduce energy use in student dorms. My weekend volunteer work involved battling Chicago’s invasive species, buckthorns and garlic mustard.

My enthusiasm for conservation motivated me to become co-leader of an AmeriCorps field team after graduating. My team and I were based near Mount Adams in Washington State and worked throughout Washington and Oregon. We maintained hiking trails, cut down invasive plant species, and built barbed wire fences to keep cattle out of sensitive riparian zones. ...

After AmeriCorps, my goals and ideas about service changed because I realized that my “service” to the environment was actually service to myself. I wanted to preserve the environment because I wanted to hike in beautiful landscapes, not because the poor critters were losing their homes. I began looking for ways to improve human well-being and environmental quality simultaneously. I also wanted to have a bigger impact than my previous volunteer experience had allowed for. ...

Now, as a PhD candidate at the School of Sustainability, I am planning my dissertation research on sanitation in India, where less than 32% of the population has access to basic sanitation. Sanitation protects the environment while improving people’s lives and promoting social justice.