

I was forty meters below the ocean's surface when I found myself in a scene unlike any I had seen except in a nature documentary. The setting was Lighthouse Reef off the coast of Belize. A loggerhead turtle chooses a queen conch for lunch, but the remoras who hitch rides on its back are greedy. As the loggerhead digs into the shell to retrieve the animal inside, the freeloading fish attempt to steal it, quite literally, from right under its nose. A fight ensues. The loggerhead secures the shell with its fins, then bites at the conch and the fish to ward them off its feast. Both turtle and fish are unaware of the audience of newly scuba certified Wake Forest undergraduate students forming a circle around the scene. Eventually, the remoras succeed in capturing the conch, and the loggerhead swims away through the gap in the divers' circle in search of an easier meal.

Words are insufficient to convey the wonder and beauty of that moment I experienced at the bottom of the ocean. It was when I fell in love with the ocean and imagined a career promoting sustainability. I was able to experience this amazing moment among many others as part of a class I took on the ecology of coral reefs. My undergraduate experience as a biology major was different from most other students entering law school. I spent my time running experiments, writing lab reports, and reading scientific research papers. When I entered college as a freshman, I was a STEM girl through and through. I spent the first two years of college this way, with no plan for how I would use the degree in chemistry I was pursuing. My interests pulled me toward biology and environmental science, leading me to those impactful days at the bottom of the sea where I strengthened my passion for the environment and envisioned a career that melds my academic pursuits and values. I eventually changed my major to biology and began to think about a career outside the lab for the first time.

I started exploring career options in the environmental field as I realized that I did not want to be an expert on a niche topic in biology. I am interested in the big picture and in going beyond the technical study of our natural world in order to ensure its survival for future generations. The work of scientists is the first step in making change, but those in the legal and political spheres have the power to make the changes petitioned by scientists. Though a research-oriented career in biology or environmental science would not be right for me, my interest in environmental science, combined with my passion for promoting sustainability, led me to law school and a career in environmental law.

The main catalyst for pursuing this career is the suffocating fear that my grandchildren will experience a vastly different world than the one I see now, but not different in a positive way. Different as in coastal towns under water. Clearcut land where billions of trees once stood. Communities destroyed by extraordinarily strong wildfires and hurricanes. Food and water scarcity. The world is already changing in this direction. Humans do not steward this planet as we should, and we take more than we give. My passion for changing this future we're barreling towards has two facets. I wish to protect the environment for its own sake--for its beauty and everything it provides for us. The second motivator is often absent from the conversation. One of the hottest (pun intended) topics in the environmental sphere is climate change, and people often dismiss its gravity by citing the earth's extensive history of high temperatures and extreme environments. These facts are not incorrect, but their perception of the problem is. The planet itself will survive climate change—it has for billions of years—but human society as we know it will not. People and their homes and communities are what is in danger in this rapidly changing environment. I not only hope to be an advocate for the earth, but also for the people on it by conserving our resources and standing against those who threaten them.

I don't have one specific career aspiration following my graduation from law school, but I won't be satisfied until I have successfully done something, no matter how small, that benefits this magnificent planet we call home. In my final year of college, as I worked in my research lab collecting information on the greenness level of the grass in the Serengeti in different seasons, I imagined one day representing the interests of the Serengeti ecosystem with a real understanding of the mechanisms that drive that ecosystem. Or perhaps I will defend new fishing regulations that protect the conchs on which loggerheads feed and the livelihoods of the people that live on Lighthouse Reef in Belize. I never imagined I would apply to law school when I began college as a chemistry major, but my rigorous study of science coupled with my passion for protecting the environment have prepared me to be successful. My career goal is to engage in meaningful work promoting sustainability at the intersection of law and science.