

Back Bay Wildlife Refuge Internship Reflection

This summer was a fulfilling and exciting time for me as one of the first students to participate in the Conservation Leadership minor at ODU. After having taken the more lecture and literature based Adaptation and Mitigation course in the Spring of 2017 and successfully completing the service-learning course of Sustainability Leadership in the first portion of this summer; my knowledge and understanding of sustainability, leadership in conservation and systems thinking were put to the test in my internship with the US Fish and Wildlife Service at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge. This internship really opened my eyes to the generally unseen inner workings of a federal agency. Previously, I had no experience working with any sort of government agency so I regard this experience as a rare and special opportunity that I am very grateful to have participated in.

While we were a different breed of interns, being local and more research based, the daily and sometimes unexpected events that occur on the refuge are hard to miss when you are there. Getting to be outside in the fresh air surrounded by water, wildlife, and beautiful landscapes while at work is not an everyday occurrence for most people and it is something I cherished during my time at Back Bay. Whether it was during a bird survey on the beach, laying down pollinator transects in fields and dunes, or just taking a stroll down a trail on my lunch break – I never knew what I was going to see and was always filled with wonder of the nature that surrounded me. The beauty of this refuge was a daily reward for me every time I came to do work.

The majority of my time was spent working on a report for the refuge managers and staff. This report focused on questions regarding the barrier island system, local sea level rise, the potential thresholds for an ocean-bay breach to occur in the near future, and the implications of such an event (should it happen) to both the habitat and various species that require freshwater ecosystems such as the American Widgeon. In discovering the answers to these questions, I was charged with developing possible options and personal recommendations for future management of these issues in a way that incorporates sustainable, conservation-based, system of systems method of thinking.

This minor and internship have broadened my horizons; allowing me to see the world and the professions behind conservation work with a fresh perspective. I hope to use my experience with the Fish and Wildlife Service at Back Bay NWR as a stepping stone towards a future, fulfilling career in environmental conservation work that will provide meaningful value to the Earth and the life within it. Thank you to all the employees of the US Fish and Wildlife Service for helping create this incredible opportunity for myself and my classmates.

- Nikolai Karlov