Oh, the Places Your Career May Take You....

By Andrea Watts

This year, we are launching a new column in The Forestry Source—The Future of SAF. This column will feature up-and-coming student members who will continue SAF’s legacy into the next 100 years. The idea for this column is the brainchild of Susan Stout, and we extend our hearty thanks to Susan and Jasmine Brown for their assistance in identifying students to feature and for coordinating the writing of these columns.

For our inaugural column, we are featuring Brown, a master’s student at Oregon State University (OSU). She joined SAF in 2013 while attending Alabama A&M University and has quickly taken advantage of the available leadership opportunities. Brown is a member of the SAF Diversity and Inclusion Working Group and is a part of the 2018 cohort of the SAF Diversity Scholars Program. She serves as the membership chair for the Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS) chapter at Oregon State University. In her own words, Brown shares why she decided to enter the forestry profession and why she’s excited for the future.

Her current position

I am currently a master’s student at Oregon State University in the Forest Ecosystems...
and Society (FES) Program. For my research, I am conducting a comprehensive analysis of scholarly discourses about cultural diversity and workforce demographics within the natural-resources profession. Through my research, I want to answer questions about the demographics of the natural-resources profession, while also encouraging critical self-reflection. Since FES focuses on socioecological issues, I am able to consider various ways of assessing complex problems. The increased flexibility within the program also allows me to incorporate a wide range of disciplines, such as the humanities and social sciences, into my research. Thus far, I have enrolled in classes such as sustainable forest management, philosophy, environmental sociology, and ethnic studies.

Aside from taking classes and focusing on research, I am also a Forest Service Pathways Intern in Silviculture on the Umatilla National Forest in Region 6. This summer, I was stationed in Walla Walla, Washington. Being born and raised in Bridgeport, Connecticut, I sit back and marvel at how different the landscapes are in the Pacific Northwest. In addition to learning about the overarching mission and goals of the Forest Service, I was exposed to more than 12 areas of natural-resource management, such as hydrology, trail maintenance, seedling regeneration surveys, community engagement, recruiting, insect monitoring, silviculture diagnoses, and more.

Her inspiration to consider a career in forestry

I was inspired by my charismatic father to pursue my interests in forestry. When I was young, he asked me to imagine my dream job and encouraged me chase after it. I would close my eyes, and instantly I could see that my dream job involved working outside with nature. In high school, my dad’s advice was “Always do what you love.” I have followed his advice ever since.

How her educational career prepared her for a career in forestry

In 2015, I graduated from the University of Connecticut with a bachelor’s degree in natural resources, with a concentration in sustainable forest resources. Through a student exchange program, I attended Alabama A&M University during my junior year. This experience introduced me to the value of being familiar with various forest types. I took a dendrology class while at Alabama and was shocked at how many types of trees I was unfamiliar with. My dendrology professor prepared us for all the places that our forestry careers might take us by teaching us about trees all over the country. I never thought I would end up working all over the country, so I am very fortunate to have such a well-rounded understanding of various forest types. Spending one year at Alabama A&M University also taught me the value of attending a historically black college and university (HBCU) as an African American female forester.

Why she decided to return to graduate school

Prior to returning to graduate school, I was a forest technician with the Forest Service Enterprise Program for three seasons. This job entailed traveling to a different national forest each month to help with timber-sale preparation, which mostly entailed timber marking. I worked on eight national forests in Vermont, Arkansas, California, South Dakota, New Mexico, and Arizona, to name a few. I learned so much about forest management and valuable lessons about implementation. However, I realized I still...
had several burning questions related to the natural-resources workforce. I decided to challenge myself by going back to school to answer these burning questions. I decided not let labels such as “first-generation graduate student” or being “an underrepresented minority in forestry” define my career success.

Returning to graduate school has expanded my horizons in numerous ways. Being in an interdisciplinary program like Forest Ecosystems and Society helps me see the benefits of stepping out of my “forestry comfort zone” and learning more about other disciplines. I realize how disciplinary boundaries can place limitations on the types of questions that we ask as scholars and managers. Being a graduate student has sparked my interest in social science research. Returning to graduate school has also reminded me of the value behind having academic and professional experiences this early in my career.

Her career goals and what she hopes to achieve

With my dad in mind, I always try to make sure that my career goals involve doing things that I love. As an early-career professional, I am being exposed to so many options. I would say the list of things I love about my natural-resources career is ever-changing, therefore, my career goals must do the same. Overall, I hope to make a positive impact and continue to defy narratives about what a traditional forester may look like, do, study, and more.

What she brings to the natural-resources profession

Skills I bring with me to this profession are leadership, public speaking, and mentorship skills. Being selected as a member of the 2018 Diversity Scholars Program helped me develop the previously mentioned skills, in addition to fostering networking opportunities at my second SAF convention in Portland, Oregon, during October 2018.

A defining moment in her career

In 2014, during my junior year in college, I took a course in silviculture. I struggled to understand some of the material in the class, and ultimately ended up receiving a C+. Unknowingly, I used the grades I received in my forestry classes as deciding factors for my future career paths. I assumed that getting a C+ in silviculture meant I would never have anything to do with silviculture in my forestry career.

I went on to work as a timber maker for three seasons, and suddenly, I was having to take directions from numerous silviculturists. I would attend meetings where we reviewed the silvicultural prescriptions and marking guides. Fast forward to 2017, where I apply for a Pathways Internship, and the hiring official says that my prior career experience perfectly aligns with a career path in silviculture. I say this to say to other students—reconsider the assumptions you may be carrying with you. Little did I know that the C+ I received in the silviculture course was not a deciding factor for my career. I share this defining moment to show how things in life come full circle, and how your career may take you places that you might have eliminated as options.

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