

Growing up in the Hampton Roads area, I've always been very close to the water. Naturally, this easily sparked my interest in the ecosystems in the nearby ocean and the animals within them. However, it wasn't until later in high school that I realized this fascination was something I wanted to turn into my future career. Realizing this, I decided to pursue a degree in marine biology as my undergraduate. Since then, my original fascination has now evolved to a greater respect and understanding of the ocean and the creatures within it. As I prepare to graduate college this fall, I'm looking forward to future opportunities to continue my journey on this path.

During my undergraduate studies at Old Dominion University, I have pursued coursework related to a wide range of scientific fields. However, my main interest has always been in my classes relating to marine biology. My most exciting experience was taking a scientific diving and research class last summer. During this course, my peers and I became PADI scuba certified as we completed various dives, with two occurring at about 80 feet in the Atlantic Ocean. In addition to diving, we also learned about effectively collecting data while underwater as we became scientific divers in the American Association of Underwater Sciences. The opportunity to be underwater and to be able to observe so much wildlife that is normally hidden was such a unique experience for me, and it has only furthered my desire to become involved in this field.

In addition to my coursework, I gained hands-on experience at the Virginia Living Museum. I started as a volunteer in their education department working at the touch pool for a few years. During this time, I learned about various marine invertebrates that were in the pool, learning how to handle them and how to educate visiting families not only about their interesting facts but their conservation status and why it's important. However, recently, I have started an internship with their aquarist department where I aid in a lot more of the behind-the-scenes work, like food preparation, feedings, water chemistry and quality monitoring, exhibit cleaning, and various other responsibilities. Additionally, there's an accompanying project during the internship that I'll be working on with the aquarist staff. Since starting this internship and shadowing the aquarist staff, I've learned so much about what it truly means to work in animal husbandry at an aquarium. Though it isn't all glamorous as some believe it to be, I'm still even more excited about pursuing this in a full-time role as my passion for marine biology has only grown as I've moved from simply learning about the animals in a classroom setting to becoming involved in their care.

My long-term goal is to work at an Aquarium in the role of an aquarist or mammologist. Though this was my original dream back in high school, it is still true to this day as I've been able to see the work firsthand at the Virginia Living Museum. I would love to explore opportunities at big aquariums like the Georgia, Florida, or Baltimore Aquarium even if simply volunteering or an internship to start out. In my future work at an aquarium, I would love to become more involved with marine mammals as well. Though I love all the fish I currently work with, I'm still very interested in the husbandry aspect of mammals at an aquarium as well. Additionally, becoming involved in the conservation of endangered marine species is something I'm also interested in pursuing.

Ultimately, wherever I may end up, I aspire to use my educational background and the valuable skills I've learned from my volunteer and intern positions to not only be passionate and invested in my job but also make a difference in my career field as well. Conservation has been an interest of mine as long as marine biology has, and it would be an absolute privilege to work with an aquarium and its conservation team to inspire change in this capacity.