

How a Student Views the Field

By Jesse Dillon

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It was the Colorado Section meeting in 2004 when the presiding president Rob Alexander told the members that one of his goals during his term was to tie bonds between the student chapter and the section. He said this was because “everything is more exciting for us when the students are involved.” As the acting president of the Range Ecology Club at Colorado State University, thus the head of the student chapter at the time, I thought to myself, “How can I help to develop and encourage this bond?” Then it hit me. I should speak to the members at the next section meeting. During the next break, I found Rob Alexander, who was chatting with Roy Roath, the next president, and other members of the group, and introduced myself and suggested (perhaps foolishly) that I could speak at the next meeting if they thought it would be interesting.

About 6 months later, Roy Roath, who was in charge of organizing the meeting for 2005, approached me to say that he had developed the speakers list for the meeting and was counting on me to speak. I thought to myself, “Surely he is not holding me to an off comment I made nearly 6 months ago,” but he was. So that is how it came that I would be speaking at the Colorado Section’s 2005 meeting.

Approximately 1 week before the meeting I was starting to worry, I had spent considerable time thinking about my speech and still had no direction. The theme of the meeting was “Past, Present, and Future” and I was there to represent the future. My speech was titled “Preparing for a Career: How a College Student Views the Field” in the program for

the meeting which had been distributed a month earlier. It was too late to back out now. I needed to focus and develop something to talk about. Again, I was hit with a moment of clarity, “Jesse,” I said to myself, “you have heard all of your professors say ‘you don’t know where you are going, unless you know where you have been.’” I decided that I would tell my story of how I got into the field.

I grew up in a quaint little town of nearly 200,000 about 25 miles straight west of America’s third largest metropolis, Chicago. Illinois is a state with a diminishing 0.01% of the historic rangelands, the tall-grass prairie. However, I was drawn to them in high school when I had taken a class entitled “Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM).” This class taught basic ecological principles and processes but most importantly to me at the time it included many field trips with opportunities to leave school. On one of our field trips, we were taken to Treehaven, a field campus for natural resource students for University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point. On this trip I was exposed to multiple ecosystems and ecological processes. This exposure fueled my ever-growing interest in natural resources; so much so, that after this trip that I had decided that I would study natural resources in college.

The rest of that year in high school was spent looking at colleges and spending free time in the tall-grass prairie near my house. The prairie was located at Fermilab National Laboratory, an underground particle accelerator. They had a very intensive management plan and had even returned the native grazer of buffalo to their land. This land had truly drawn my interest. I really wanted to know how and why it worked as it did. At the same time the land was drawing my curiosity, my teacher from INRM class had suggested Colorado State