

[From Winter 1999]

Student Career Experience Program

A little over a year ago, I was an ordinary college graduate looking desperately for a job. I applied for anything I could find, most being non-paying volunteer positions just for experience. After months of denial letters, I finally received a promising call. I had an interview to be in the SCEP program at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. At that point, I was wondering the same thing you are. What in the world is the SCEP program and how did I get into it.

The SCEP program stands for Student Career Experience Program. It is open to any student who is seeking a degree at an accredited college or university, whether at the undergraduate or post-graduate level. Each student is selected based on college transcripts, work experience, interview, enrollment in either a graduate or undergraduate program, and desire to have a career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Once selected, students are required to complete all necessary course requirements for the degree being sought, as well as 640 hours of career-related work.

Each year, USF&WS Region 5 selects approximately 10 students to enter this program. The regional office makes its selections by reviewing interviews made at career fairs at several universities (usually ones with a wildlife unit) and by reviewing applications directly received. Applications must contain a resume, college transcript, cover letter, and federal form SF-171 or OF-612.

The program requires each student to perform a variety of functions which support the activities of professional biologists and managers. Assignments are designed to orient and expose the student to the mission and work of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and to the benefits and conditions of federal employment. Some major duties include: collecting basic data from field investigations and reporting observations; answering routine questions from visitors, providing directions, and occasionally conducting tours for the visiting public; performing data analysis and drafting objective reports to evaluate findings; attending professional and related wildlife meetings; preparing correspondence and routine reports; taking course work relevant to research and refuge management; interacting with various university, state, and federal colleagues; writing reports about data collection and results; and assisting in all facets of Refuge operations and management, including habitat management, wildlife inventories, maintenance, and public use programs.

Being such a young employee of the Service tends to draw a lot of attention from friends, family, and peers. Many of them ask the same question of me, "How did you get your job in a time when jobs for recent graduates seem so limited in the biological field?" Many times students think that the perfect job will just fall into their lap upon graduation. However, I'll be the first to say this is not the case.

In order for recent graduates to start a career in the biological field, there are two major suggestions which I would make. Experience is key to being recognized by any employer, and many times non-paying jobs are necessary to get that experience. Also, getting as much experience as possible with the agency you would like to work for, whether it be National Wildlife Refuges, National Parks, National Forests, etc., is a must. It is possible to get into a SCEP program with any of these agencies. The other suggestion I would make to upcoming graduates is to learn as much as you can at the jobs you take and make solid contacts. Making a good impression is very important, and I assure you those contacts will remain as important mentors throughout your career.

There are many benefits to being in the program, which put it ahead of any other opportunity a recent college graduate could be offered. While being a student, I receive full benefits just as any other employee, and am able to attend school when necessary. I work full-time hours and upon completion of all requirements for the program and graduation, I can be converted to a full time permanent employee without competing with other applicants. Also, as a graduate student at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore in Princess Anne, MD, I am conducting a master's thesis project on reptiles and amphibians for the refuge.

If you'd like more information or if you know of a college student, recent college graduate, or graduate looking to get into a post-graduate program that could lead to a career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, please call the refuge at (757) 336-6122.

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