Public Statement

EcoQuest, a New Zealand-based ecology and environmental studies program, was a rare and exciting chance for me to learn about the natural environment in a small, hands-on setting. In our community space, we had numerous opportunities to discover and pursue our interests, meet environmental leaders, and become leaders ourselves.

The program had only 26 students and most learning occurring outdoors in ecological settings directly applicable to course concepts. For example, if we were learning about marine ecology, we were being lectured on a boat in a marine reserve and then went snorkeling to observe sea life. When we learned about extractive industries, we were given talks by guest speakers on the outskirts of an open-pit gold mine. This individualized attention and direct experience in what we were studying made learning an effortless but exciting task.

Through EcoQuest connections, I also had to opportunity to personally meet many frontrunners in environmentally-related fields. These leaders told their stories of how pursuing their passions helped them to the positions they are in, not the other way around. Their talks have inspired me to fully pursue my passions, mainly in restoration ecology, and let my excitement in the field lead me to the right position.

With these exemplary leaders in mind, I was then able to test my own leadership skills as I strived to help create a successful learning community. As a small group of students, all living in learning in the same limited space, we had to be inclusive and considerate of each other while still adding our own talents and personalities into the space. As I think one of the most important leadership skills is leading by example, I hope that I was able to exemplify aspects of considerateness and acceptance so that others around me, if they were not already, would do the same.

In addition to creating a positive community setting within our small student group, our interactions with the broader community also had leadership implications. We, as a group, had to lead by example with our community lifestyle choices, such as reducing our waste, keeping our surroundings well cared-for, and choosing to use our time productively. We had a special chance to showcase these choices as we presented our research at the local Mauri, or the gathering place of the local Maori people. There, we told the community about our environmental field work and research results, as well as their wider implications, in hope that our interest and example would inspire the community to take action on important environmental issues.

EcoQuest was the best learning experience I have had in my life. I have gained invaluable skills, motivation, and outlook from my time in New Zealand and from those who I was able to spend time with and learn from. This experience has driven me to pursue more travel-related experiences in the hope of further peaking my curiosity about the world and to gain the necessary skills to help me pursue my passions in the natural environment. I would like to thank the Barger Leadership Institute for helping fund my experience and for helping inspire these outcomes.