May 2021

Zooming Through Environmental Policy With Dan Sealy

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Recommended Citation
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Dan Sealy is currently the Legislative Analyst for the Northcoast Environmental Center (NEC) as well as the community partner and mentor for the Environmental Policy Internship. “The supervisor Dan is just fantastic, so knowledgeable, helpful, and very informative,” student V Odom said. “He’s been the internship supervisor for a long time, he’s a chief legislative analyst, he went to HSU back in the 70’s, and he’s just a wealth of knowledge. Dan’s a resource, a reference, and a friend that I will hopefully have for the rest of my life.”

Sealy graduated from HSU in 1975 with a BS in Natural Resources Management. Immediately after graduating Sealy began working for the National Park Service. “My work took me to several parts of the country, but my last assignment was in a science office in Washington, DC,” Sealy shared. “When I retired, my husband, Bryan, and I decided we wanted to make Humboldt our home. So we bought a house in Trinidad, but [my] work continues in the DC area, so we live half time in Trinidad and half in a suburb of DC. Since I have access to, and some knowledge about the federal legislative process, I volunteered with the NEC tracking environmental legislation and the work of federal land management agencies like the Park Service, Forest Service, and Fish & Wildlife Service.”

The Environmental Policy Internship is a collaboration between Humboldt State University and Northcoast Environmental Center that Sealy started in 2013 after noticing a lack of collaboration between the two. “The NEC has an amazing membership of scientists and conservation-minded people, but our links to HSU students were not as strong as they had been when I was a
student,” Sealy shared. “I wanted to work with students to learn their concerns and skills, and to connect my knowledge with them so they could be as effective as possible in working for environmental protection.”

Sealy organized the internship, before the switch to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as a virtual learning experience with in person components. “The students and I collaboratively identify legislation that is of interest to them, and to the NEC, and they track that through the legislative process,” Sealy shared. “We review how congress and the Executive (President’s) branch accomplish work and how stakeholders affect change on environmental policy. Students observe Congressional committees in real time, or on an archived video, I join them and we watch what is going on in the background as well as what they see on the screen and how to read the action going on. I teach them how to write ‘briefs,’ which are very short reports on a piece of legislation; this is a skill that has many uses as students progress through their careers. They also attend local conservation committee meetings with NEC board members, and local conservation activists, to learn about local issues that link to federal policy.”

There are many ways for students to get involved, says Sealy; “Some interns conduct presentations to the NEC conservation committee. Some write articles for the EcoNews, the NEC monthly publication. Some attend Town Hall meetings, meet with members of congress when they are in the area, and some meet with congressional staff who work in the local district. We seize on whatever opportunities arise.”

Natalie Vaughan graduated from HSU with a degree in Environmental Science (ES): Environmental Planning and Policy. Vaughan was one of the first interns Sealy ever mentored at HSU as part of the Environmental Policy Internship. “Natalie Vaughn was one of my first interns,” Sealy shared. “Natalie was an Environmental Sciences major, but she was, and is also, a very accomplished professional photographer. She loves nature photography as well as fashion photography, she has a unique style and is committed to help women find their ‘visual branding strategy for women entrepreneurs.’ Her family has a cabin in the Sierras, next to the Bucks Lake Wilderness Area, and her grandfather was a friend of the founder of Friends of the Earth, David Brower. Stories told by her grandfather and experiences at that cabin gave her a deep appreciation for wilderness which she captured in some photographs. [What

inspired me about Natalie was that] her excitement and motivation led her to find opportunities to exhibit some of her photographs at a wilderness exhibit at the Umpqua Bank in Arcata and to apply to be a youth voice at the 50th Anniversary Wilderness Conference in New Mexico, which she was chosen for.”

While Sealy structured the internship within a general framework, he caters the work to each intern’s interests and desires. “I chose what I wanted to do with the internship, I was really in control and free to pick what projects I wanted to work on,” Vaughan said. “I didn’t have as much to do with the legislative side of it. I went on several backpacking trips to capture the beauty and the detail of the wilderness and [the photos were] published in EcoNews. Photography is powerful, it added detail and drew more people in, I think it really emphasized what they were trying to do and their [overall] messages.”

Following her graduation from HSU in 2013, Vaughan got a job with an environmental consulting company and wrote phase one environmental site assessments. “It was absolutely the worst job of my entire life and I was absolutely miserable,” Vaughan said. “So I quit and decided to pursue photography, my other passion. I do fashion and branding photography for different brands, companies and other women entrepreneurs. Now I’m doing photography and seeing what else the world has in store for me. If I’m going to return to the environmental realm, I’ll stick to photography, or combine them and do environmental photography.”

Sealy acknowledged that even though Vaughan is currently in a different field, her impact is still felt. “Natalie is now a wife, mother, and still a fashion photographer, but her direct work with wilderness is taking a pause to experience these other parts of her life,” Sealy shared. “That is a story that does not get told as often: the person who holds their enthusiasm and love for nature as an essential part of who they are, though they will not be the headline activist each year or period of their life. All efforts and abilities at whatever time, add to the success of the whole. Natalie will have time to share her love of nature and wilderness with her daughter, and that is an equal gift.”

“The biggest takeaway [from working with Dan in the NEC internship] was that I can use my unique skills and passions in an impactful way,” Vaughan said.

The Environmental Policy Internship has integrated
coursework from HSU and provided applicable long-lasting knowledge for numerous individuals since its inception. Aisha Cissna was a student at HSU from 2012-2016, who also participated in the NEC internship with Sealy. She graduated with a degree in Environmental Science: Planning and Policy and found a job locally based in Eureka. Cissna is currently a Regulatory and Legislative Policy Manager at the Redwood Coast Energy Authority. “Everything from that internship is directly applicable to what I do today,” Cissna said. “In addition to showing me the ropes on how to monitor legislative development, Dan also guided me through preparing legislative briefs for the NEC board, so that they could vote to support or oppose certain legislation. In my current position I do that, I actually just did that. Right now I am focusing on state legislation, which is different, as the scope of the internship was focused on federal legislation.”

Kenny Mort is an Environmental Science and Management (ESM) Environmental Planning and Policy major at HSU, with a double minor in GIS and Philosophy. Mort is in his final semester at HSU and will be graduating this spring. Mort began working with Dan Sealy two semesters ago, and is currently in his third and final semester working within the NEC internship. Mort has completed his 90 hour internship requirements and is still working within the NEC internship because he appreciates Sealy as a mentor and truly enjoys working with the NEC.

During his internship with Sealy and the NEC, Mort has had the opportunity to write and co-author some articles recently published in EcoNews. EcoNews is the NEC’s publication released monthly, highlighting environmental journalism. “The experience writing the briefs and the articles has been awesome,” Mort said.

Mort plans to volunteer with the NEC upon his completion of the internship after graduating. Mort will be attending various organizational meetings, with the intent to report back what happened within those
meetings to the NEC conservation committee, and he may write and/or collaborate with Sealy on some more articles in EcoNews.

V Odom is also an ESM: Environmental Planning and Policy major -- they started at HSU in January of 2020 and was an intern alongside Mort. Odom completed their NEC internship during their first year at HSU, utilizing two semesters to fulfill the 90 hour requirement. Odom will be graduating in the spring of 2022. “It was definitely one of those internships that’s exactly what you want to do when you are in planning and policy, if you want to enhance your understanding of legislation, how congress works, and what it means to track legislation,” Odom said. “Also to understand what really drives party division and to explore the different patterns and trends in environmentally conscious legislation.”

While teaching and connecting HSU students to the NEC was a primary goal for Sealy founding the internship, the teachings and perspectives that the students brought to the NEC were also a motivation. “Although the interns help us track important legislation to make sure we know when we can mobilize our members and the general public to support important legislative decisions in DC, I believe the most important impact the intern has is to provide a fresh perspective to an organization that has been around for 50 years,” Sealy shared. “If NEC is to continue for another 50 years and help protect our environment, wildlife, rivers, oceans and public health, we must continue to grow and apply new learning and knowledge. It is a two-way street: interns engage with conservation advocates and scientists, while NEC has young voices at the table. One of my interns, Aisha Cissna is now employed in the area by the Redwood Coast Energy Authority and is now an at-large member of our NEC board.”

At Sealy’s encouragement, Cissna joined the NEC board in February of 2020. “I got to learn alot about the organization as an intern and having attended the networking events, have all been very helpful as I acclimate to being a board member,” Cissna said. “It’s been really engaging work, while I work in the energy and environ-
mental sector, I think right now NEC is going through a growth period where we have seen great strides in emphasizing environmental justice.”

For many of the individuals who were mentored by Sealy, it was his passion, kindness, and knowledge that made his mentorship beneficial. “Dan was the reason the internship was so great, whereas the NEC is a great organization and I am sure that no matter who headed it, it would be fantastic, I just genuinely loved my supervisor,” Odom said. “Dan’s a great guy, kind and understanding, and he just genuinely wants us to succeed. He wants us to come out of the internship with a tactical body of work, like the briefings and the report, that we can use going forward. It was very individualized work but there were constant check-ins and multiple answers whenever I had a question. When I did have questions he would do as much as he could to locate sources, locate people, and other resources for me to use. He just wanted us to succeed so badly, you could feel that, and it was nice to really have that push.”

Sealy continues to support his interns even after their internship has ended. “Dan and I have stayed closely connected ever since the internship,” Vaughan said. “He’s always been a really big support for me and my career, he’s always checking in and seeing how he can connect me with people.”

Sealy’s many years of excellent mentoring as a community partner host for HSU students from community-based learning courses, including his participation on panels and other efforts for HSU students, render him a top-notch community partner. In the words of Stacy Becker, CCBL’s Community Partner Coordinator, “Dan has taken the notion of community engagement up another notch to the level of civic engagement,” Becker said. “Even after COVID imposed its limits on community-based learning practices, Dan did not skip a beat with his Environmental Policy Interns program. Not only has he empowered students to build personal and professional skills and experiences on their career paths, but he has given them lifelong skills as citizens to participate in democracy and make the changes - environmental, social, political, legal, and civic - that they wish to see. All told, over the years, he has delivered a particularly potent blend of mentoring, enabling, teaching and participation to HSU students that not only enriches their lives and the curriculum they’re studying, but also endeavors to enrich our society and the land we live on.”

The internship provides students transferable skills to many fields. “The skills that Dan teaches, while his expertise is in the natural resources world, are applicable to advocacy for any cause one could want to advocate for,” Cissna said. “And along the lines of environmental justice, I think at the end of the day it’s really about achieving greater intersectionality within the environmental movement.”

To learn more about V Odom’s experience with their NEC internship under the mentorship of Dan Sealy, we encourage you to read their internship reflection featured within this issue on the following page.

For more on Dan Sealy and the NEC Environmental Policy internship check out these articles written by Sealy and NEC interns Kenny Mort (featured within this article) and Caroline Griffith:

Student Focus: Environmental Policy Intern, Kenny Mort by Kenny Mort; Sep. 2020 EcoNews; 9/3/2020
https://www.yournec.org/student-focus-environmental-policy-intern-kenny-mort/

https://www.yournec.org/eye-on-washington-february-2021/

Where Conservation Meets National Politics, NEC Legislative Interns Keep Us Up-To-Date by Caroline Griffith; June 2020 EcoNews; 5/27/2020
https://www.yournec.org/where-conservation-meets-national-politics-nec-legislative-interns-keep-us-up-to-date

To check out Natalie Vaughan's current work, go to her photography site here:
https://www.natvonphoto.com/