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# V ODOM INTERNSHIP REFLECTION 16 JANUARY 2021

By V Odom

*NEC intern, V Odom, during the spring and fall 2020 semesters at HSU. Image provided by: V Odom*

It's never too late to start over. That's what I thought to myself when I made the decision to re-enroll in college after a long, much-needed, break. A few years ago, I obtained my Associates in Arts for Communication at my community college in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. I had been working full-time as a server at a sports bar and then as an emergency group home worker at a shelter for at-risk youth. I knew that I liked people, and I wanted to help society, but beyond that I wasn't sure what else I could do. After two years of complacently idling by in the human and food service industries, I decided that it was time to figure something else out.

In February of 2019, I visited my sister and her husband in Palm Coast, Florida. They were living between the Atlantic Ocean and the Intracoastal Waterway, a popular migration route for manatees and porpoises. It was there that I really experienced the coastal ecosystem for myself for the first time. I was fascinated. I had always had a profound appreciation for nature, but that trip made me realize that I wanted to learn as much as I could about different ecosystems, especially marine and aquatic ones, and how to protect their sanctity. To that end, I began thinking about environmental law. It wasn't long after I returned home from Florida that I had completed multiple applications for coastal Cali-

fornia schools. I had never seen the Pacific and I wanted to make going back to school feel totally brand new.

I arrived at Humboldt State University with the express purpose of learning as much as I could about how human actions impact the natural environment. In particular, I wanted to understand the decision-making processes that drive environmental policy. Growing up in Illinois, I learned all about the prairie ecosystem and how its hundreds of millions of acres had dwindled as a result of human migration and suburbanization. I had always felt that since it's we humans that have desecrated nature, it must also be us humans that restore and protect it. When I began at Humboldt, I already knew that I'd need to develop a much deeper understanding of the legislative process, a topic I'd more or less actively avoided for years. Therefore, when I received an email from my department head's assistant promoting an Environmental Policy Internship with the Northcoast Environmental Center in Arcata, I knew that it would be the perfect chance for me to get accustomed to the intricacies of the legislative process as they pertain to local environmental concerns.

My NEC supervisor, Dan Sealy, is an experienced federal legislative analyst who lives and works between Trinidad, CA and Washington, D.C. As policy interns, our job was to track environmentally conscious legislation through Congress, learn about the bills' backgrounds and stakeholders, observe how they were discussed and amended by lawmakers, and explore trends in partisan division in values and voting. During my time with the NEC, Dan taught the other interns and me about the connection between environmentalism and politics – namely that every proposed bill must follow a mostly time-consuming and somewhat inefficient path through Congress in order to become law. Not every bill receives bipartisan support, so oftentimes amendments must be made and approved in various committees before returning to the House or Senate floor. It's a rigorous process that was at times fairly frustrating to track. Some legislation goes nowhere; some is pushed through with tremendous speed. It's very important to note that our elected representatives are just as human as anyone else, and their values will influence the way they respond to a bill. Knowing and contacting our officials is a good way to keep them accountable to, and involved with, their constituency.

A lot of my internship had to be handled remotely, so I watched a number of virtual congressional committee hearings to observe how specific legislation is treated.

For example, one bill I followed closely was the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act of 2019 (S. 1499, H.R. 2795). The goal of this bill is to provide for the conservation and restoration of habitats that facilitate the movement of certain native or noninvasive species (e.g., fish, wildlife, or plant species) that may be at risk due to habitat loss or fragmentation.

In tracking this bill, I learned that there are certain ideological differences between democrats and republicans that can impede a bill's progress. In the case of S. 1499, land acquisition and financing became the two largest issues. Generally speaking, conservative members of Congress view the purchase of federal land as an example of government overreach. However, in an environmentally conscious sense, more land is needed to be sanctioned off for endangered species and migratory wildlife. Because the congressional subcommittees have been unable to agree on the provisions of the bill, and because COVID-19 has been a large focus for lawmakers, S. 1499 has yet to move any further in its path to becoming law. In May 2020, I wrote a briefing for *EcoNews*, the NEC's own publication, about S. 1499. It was featured in June 2020. In it, I describe the bill's background, relevant controversies, and its current status, which unfortunately hasn't changed at all since late Spring.

My policy internship with the NEC went along extremely well with my HSU courses. Last semester, I took both ESM 325 and ESM 360 - Environmental Law and Environmental Planning. In Law, we went over the powers given to federal agencies as stated in the Constitution. We also discussed why and how federal agencies make decisions and the political pressures that mold the decision-making process. I was very grateful that I'd already been exposed to this sort of material to some degree through working with Dan and the NEC. A lot of the material felt like review, or at the very least, I could easily contextualize it and identify existing power dynamics.

In Planning, we looked at many local problems like sea level rise, wildlife migration corridors, sustainability/walkability, green infrastructure, etc. Many of these topics are brought up at the NEC's virtual monthly Conservation Committee meetings. This again made it easier to contextualize these problems and hear from the people they impact directly. It allowed me to witness the broader scope of the timeline of policy change, from citizen concern and grassroots organization, to involvement with representatives to (potentially) being addressed by Congress. Learning about larger projects

like planning for offshore wind farms and the Klamath River Dam removals seemed a lot more intimate because of my affinity with them through my internship, regular schooling, and genuine general interest.

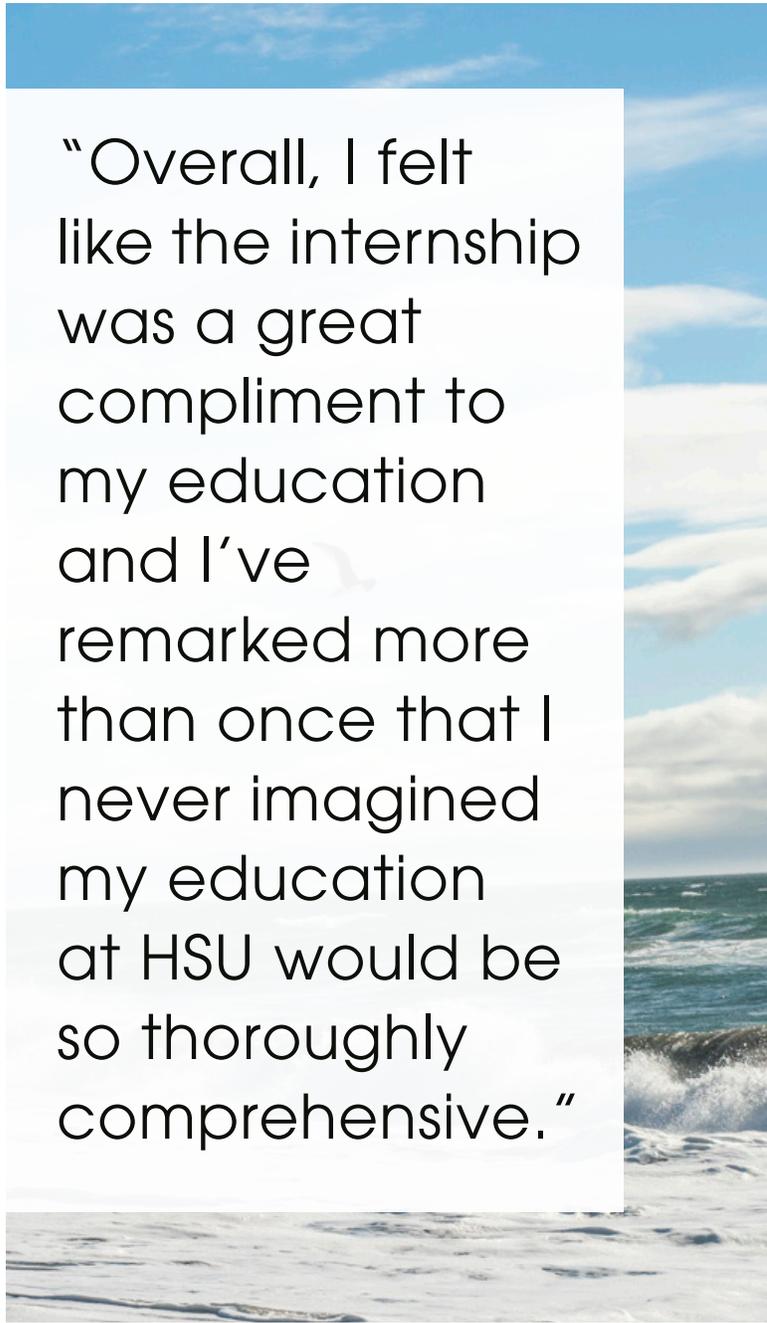
Another key topic that linked my internship with my HSU courses was that of environmental justice. Dan and I decided early on to key in on how equity and equality are addressed through legislation and planning. Luckily, my professors went over this concept in great depth. In many cases, it provided me with an opportunity to speak to my classmates and share resources I'd come across earlier with my professors. It felt really nice to be able to engage so meaningfully with my courses in that way. Overall, I felt like the internship was a great compliment to my education and I've remarked more than once that I never imagined my education at HSU would be so thoroughly comprehensive. Beyond the topics themselves, there are so many intelligent leaders and educators in this community that can act as resources and guides to help me along, and I'm so excited to continue to explore the Planning and Policy concentration with their help.

The spring and fall 2020 semesters have been difficult in that COVID-19 made everything virtual. A lot of what Dan had planned for the internship had to be canceled and reworked to meet the same standards. The same goes for all my classes. It would have been awesome to be able to travel and visit local sites for perspective and context, but ultimately I think we did okay and I still learned a lot despite the circumstances. This has been a tough learning curve for all of us and, at times, I had difficulty meeting the demands of every project I was assigned.

Regarding the future, I'm extremely grateful to Dan and the NEC for giving me the opportunity to explore whether environmental policy is right for me. Right now, I'm still planning on attending law school so that I can enforce environmentally-just planning procedures and standards in federal agencies like the EPA. I would also like to fight on behalf of Indigenous people whose land has been stolen and mistreated since this country's colonization. Especially now, with such a high degree of political unrest and polarization, I think it's important to endeavor in a professional field that does the most good for the most people and ecosystems. In my opinion, it isn't fair that political actors are so fully beholden to corporate interests and lobbyism. The good of the land should speak for itself. That said, Dan often pointed out to me that it's never quite so black and white;

a large-scale green energy project will still have some adverse effects on local industry and wildlife. There's a huge degree of planning and research that goes into the implementation of every new idea, and it doesn't work to be misinformed.

I enjoy researching legislation and I do have a deep interest in politics, so it's crucial that I continue to learn as much as I can from my professors and mentors. I am excited to continue to keep Dan as a resource and reference, and I want to continue to learn more about planning and law. I am hopeful that the rest of my time at HSU will be as highly educational and empirically sound as this past year has been.



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