

Amanda Desormeaux
2017 Michael T. Morrow Memorial Environmental Scholarship
Personal Statement

As a Central Florida native, I have always had a deep connection with our natural resources and I take pleasure in sharing these experiences with others. I have been lucky to have many opportunities for international travel and new friends around the world are always excited to hear I am from such a famous state. When I invite them to visit, they imagine a scene of Mickey Mouse and outlet malls; instead, I take them kayaking along a spring run or on a boat trip down the river. The inevitable surprise and delight in their eyes is reminiscent of my own childhood spent along the riverbanks. This deep appreciation for Florida's natural beauty has instilled an unwavering passion for protecting and managing local water resources, which has guided my academic career from the start.

My studies began at Stetson University, where I majored in environmental science. The program was interdisciplinary, exposing me to the many disciplines necessary to fully understand environmental issues. While I took courses in departments from anthropology to geology, my focus was always on how I could protect and manage Florida's abundant natural resources. As an undergraduate, I completed a dual internship with the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Volusia Soil and Water Conservation District. I aided the local soil conservationist with the implementation of agricultural best management practices (BMPs), which focused on fertilizer management to protect local water quality and irrigation efficiency upgrades to reduce agricultural water use. My time at Stetson culminated in an undergraduate thesis focused on water conservation strategies to reduce pressure on freshwater resources in Volusia County. My academic performance was strong; I graduated magna cum laude with a 3.8 GPA and became a member of Phi Beta Kappa. However, I believe it was my passion and focused interests that cultivated such strong relationships with my professors. I maintain strong connections to Stetson and have been invited on numerous occasions throughout the years to return and give talks focused on educating students about water conservation and water quality.

After graduation, I remained active with the Soil and Water Conservation District. This allowed me to cultivate a stronger connection with my community and strengthened my interest in agricultural nutrient management. This interest led me to Dr. George Hochmuth, a professor in the Soil and Water Science Department at the University of Florida who has been a leader in the research and development of urban and agricultural BMPs; his work inspired me to pursue my M.S. at the University of Florida and I was awarded a graduate assistantship to work in his lab. My Master's project aimed at understanding the impact of fertilizer technology (i.e. controlled-release fertilizer) and irrigation management on nitrate leaching losses, which is a major threat to Florida's fresh water. I measured variables critical for environmental protection (e.g. nitrate concentrations in soil water), as well as those important to the agricultural community (e.g. crop yield); I believe that the identification of win-win strategies that are affordable, practical, and protective of the environment reduce conflict and allow all stakeholders to come together to protect our water.

Despite the large workload required for the year-round care of crops, as well as the time required for field measurements and lab analysis, I was also dedicated to participating in leadership activities in our department. I became a founding member of the School of Natural Resources

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and Environment Graduate Student Council, where I organized activities that encouraged the collaboration between students working in different disciplines. It is my belief that the most important questions we seek to answer require specialization in a variety of fields; aiming to facilitate cross-disciplinary collaboration with my peers was my contribution towards this goal.

After graduating with my master's degree in 2014 with a 3.9 GPA, I was given the opportunity to pursue my PhD at the University of Florida's School of Natural Resources and Environment. I am now working on a project that has expounded upon my previous work, broadening the focus from agricultural nutrient losses to the quantification of nitrogen losses under different land uses throughout North Central Florida. This project allows me the opportunity to network with state and federal researchers, which supports my career goals of working as an environmental professional in Florida after graduation.

Throughout my life, I have had an unwavering passion for Central Florida's natural resources, both recreationally and academically. My focus during my academic career has always been on the quantity and quality of Florida's water resources, which has evolved from a focus on water conservation in my home county during my early academic career, to protecting water quality through agricultural best management practices as a master's student, and finally to a project that addresses water quality and quantity issues relevant to all land uses throughout the entire state. I have given presentations aimed to educate students and the public on water resources, completed an undergraduate thesis directly related to the management of water resources, and conducted research directly related to local water quality. I hope you will agree that my research and curriculum support both my interest and potential for high achievement in a career promoting environmental stewardship.