Internship Report:

Environmental Documentary with Dr. Jon Evans and Dr. Greg Pond

This summer, I set out to combine two areas of interest in an internship that would benefit the Sewanee community and the Environmental Studies Department at Sewanee. After learning that the overpopulation of deer on Sewanee’s campus were not only affecting community members’ gardens, but also beginning to pose a threat to the regeneration of the forest on the Domain, it became apparent that there are many aspects of the overpopulation and attempts at control that are not understood by members of the community or among departments with information about the deer. I designed an internship that would work on synthesizing information on the history of the deer population, their current effects on the forests of the Domain, and the control measures currently in place, and then presenting the information in a short film in a way that is easily understood and accessible to the greater Sewanee community. Over the course of the summer I not only learned a lot about deer populations and effects, but also collaborated with many faculty members and staff across departments in the University, and learned to use the film-editing software Final Cut Pro to produce a film.

The course of the internship included three phases: planning and research, filming and gathering visual extras, and editing. During the first phase, which lasted approximately three weeks, I drew up countless outlines that described the purpose of the film, which order interviews would appear, and the main points that I hoped to show from each featured expert on a topic. These outlines grew progressively more detailed as cues for extra visuals, including transitions, photographs, and other things I hoped to picture to accompany interviews, were described along with the more detailed script of the film (while I did more or less have a script, the interviews were entirely unscripted and consisted only of answers to questions that were posed). During this phase I also conducted substantial research on the ecology of an overpopulated deer community on the flora and fauna of an area, what goal numbers may be in
different areas of the country, and varied strategies of control. I also made contact with the people I hoped to feature in the film and help preliminary meetings with each of them to get an idea of their opinion on the effects of the current deer population and what they believed should be done, in addition to any specific information I hoped to learn from them in their specific area of expertise. I met with many professors and experts in their field, including the University forester, the Domain manager, the chief of police, the University historian, the director of sustainability, the assistant provost of sustainability, to name a few. Many of them were very helpful in directing my research and suggesting additional things to consider. One of these meetings sent me to the University Archives, where I spent several afternoons leafing through forestry files and old photographs of Charles Cheston. At the end of this phase of planning, I met with Dr. Evans and Dr. Pond to present a storyboard, complete with approximate time intervals in which everything would be pictures, and plans for filming and editing.

The next couple weeks of the summer were spent filming, logging, and transcribing hours of footage from interviews and additional shots of the forest that would later be pieced together into the final film. During this time I also ventured out in the evenings with the video camera to film deer in the yards of leaseholders and on the edge of the forests. I also sat in on several of Dr. Pond’s classes and learned the basics of using Final Cut Pro 7, a film-editing software used by the art department at Sewanee which is the same used to produce most feature films in Hollywood and in major film studios. A few technical difficulties arose at this point, which I was able to work through with the help of Dr. Evans and Dr. Pond, including the ordering and installation of the software on a computer with a very large monitor in the Landscape Analysis Lab.

I conducted a total of seven interviews during these few weeks, for which I prepared by researching the specific area of expertise of the interviewee, and preparing questions to specifically address one area of the deer overpopulation that I hoped would be addressed. I learned how to operate a high-definition camera with multiple external microphones, and how to
ask questions while filming that would address issues that would eventually be of key importance to the direction of the film. After filming the interviews and transferring them into the software program, I would go back and watch each interview, sometimes multiple times, and transcribe what was said and at what time in the clip into a word document so that I could easily skim through to find the important phrases I hoped to use in the film. These turned out to be quite invaluable to the final editing process.

The final two weeks of the summer were spent cutting, pasting, and adding transitions, extra visuals, and music to what will eventually be the completed documentary. During this time I also learned to manipulate some of the sound in Final Cut Pro to take out background noise, and recorded some narration to guide the viewer through different key points in the film. This can be exceptionally time-consuming and tedious.

Through this process, I learned the necessity of proper planning and allocating more time than seems necessary to complete a project that is dependent on a plethora of individuals across disciplines. Difficulties come up in planning around the schedules of others, and frequently interviews or meetings would be rescheduled several times. I also learned why most films, even small, low-budget productions, are done with a crew greater than one person. If someone pursues something of this nature in the future, I would highly encourage that they collaborate with another student, as it would facilitate the process at all stages. It would also reduce the likelihood of injury due to carrying camera equipment that may weigh 50-75 pounds or more all together. Perhaps the most important aspect of this project was the collaboration and networking across departments, which was necessary to complete the project. I worked with everyone from the director of the Landscape Analysis Lab, to the staff of the University Archives, to a community member and the chief of police to acquire all the information I hoped to portray in the film. Overall the film shows that many aspects of sustainability, the deer population included, are very multifaceted and require participation and cooperation from a
myriad of individuals to achieve a solution. I believe future student research will be vital to this issue and to others in realize the full sustainability potential of the university.

This project allowed me to experience a career field in which I had contemplated pursuing after graduation. I believe that film and photographs are an excellent way to bridge the gap of understanding between the scientific and academic communities and the general public. Many pressing environmental issues call for collaboration among individuals, but first the information must be presented in a way that is accessible to those in different areas of expertise. I don’t believe many economists probably pick up a copy of the scientific journal *Ecology*, but many of the issues on which scientists are doing research and hoping to advocate for, including the loss of biodiversity in what is currently being called the “Sixth Mass Extinction,” require that others, including the public as well as those with significant economic and political power, be able to understand their research and the impacts of such issues in order to affect change.

While I thoroughly enjoyed the experience of learning to make an environmental documentary this summer, if I pursue a similar project in the future I hope to recruit some help from someone interested in similar things. While this may be an option for a career field at some point in my life, I do not believe I will pursue another internship in this field in the coming years, as the tedium of extensive film editing is something I do not plan to subject myself to for long periods of time in the near future.