“Welcome to your island home.” was the main slogan at Mustang Island Conference Center, a retreat and family camp oasis nestled in the middle of a Corpus Christi, Texas barrier island in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Conference Center is owned and operated by the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas. This diocese is currently home to ninety congregations, spanning several major cities, and hundreds of miles. Within this diocese there are three major summer programs: Colorado Adventure Program, Camp Capers Summer Camp, and Mustang Island Family Camp. The Colorado Adventure Program is a backpacking trip for high school and college students, Camp Capers is a sleep-away camp for ages 8 to 18 year olds, but Mustang Island is the only summer program available to entire families. We welcomed everyone from months-old infants to elderly grandparents. Mustang Island provides a place for families to grow together and in Christ, all while enjoying the many amenities, delicious meals, a plethora of activities, and beautiful island ecology.

There were two main facets of my environmental internship for Mustang Island. The first part was family camp, where I was one of eight staff members. My responsibilities as a staff member were very diverse. A typical day included early morning beach set up, eliciting enthusiasm and helping lead treasure hunts and beach games for the younger children, cleaning and arranging guest rooms, helping lead youth
night and family dances, taking photographs of the families, assisting the chaplain with the Eucharist, and organizing and cleaning the main conference room.

Besides these broad staff duties, I also taught arts and crafts and led environmental education activities and teachings for families and children alike. The environmental education activities proved to be a very successful way of teaching children at an early age the importance of Earth and all that which dwells on. Between playdo hurricane models, nature iSpy, and family / household sustainability plans, children were able to really grasp the significance of protecting the planet and work with their parents to brainstorm ways in which they could do this as a family unit.

The second part of my environmental internship occurred during the “off days” of family camp. Along with the other Sewanee intern, I began a recycling program for the conference center, and we also worked diligently on an environmental assessment of the conference center’s buildings and activities. In creating the assessment we did extensive research on every aspect of the conference center; noting the fauna and animals surrounding it, creating spreadsheets about both environmental and monetary costs of the current usage and consumerism, reviewing the history of the island and how the conference center was intended to be an environmental mecca, and so forth. This assessment culminated in a report of electrical, monetary, and water statistics, along with suggested improvements to become more environmentally friendly, and a call to the
leaders of the West Texas Diocese and directors at Mustang Island to be stewards of God’s Earth in accordance with Episcopal proclamations.

Beyond our staff work, project, and report, we also met with Dr. McLaughlin, an environmental policy professor at the Harte Research Institute of Texas A&M Corpus Christi to further our learning, and Ms. Kristi Thomas, Corpus Christi recycling administrator, to kick-start our recycling program. Lastly, to supplement our environmental work we took several educational field trips to learn more about the island ecology at the Corpus Christi Aquarium, the University of Texas Marine Science Institute, and even several miles up and down the beach past the conference center.

In between family camp sessions and environmental work days, the entire staff volunteered at an impoverished neighborhood of Corpus Christi, Cliff Maus, run by the Episcopal Church. There we spent several hours each week hosting a day camp for the marginalized local children, working with them and empowering them to rise against the adversity that faces them on a daily basis. Every day of this summer was full of inspiration and required hard work, leading to an extremely rewarding experience.

Throughout this summer I developed a variety of skills. Some of these skills were manual skills, such as learning how to run a sound board, how to use industrial kitchen appliances, and how to clean an entire conference center. Other skills were based in organization, such as each staff member’s schedules, leading arts and crafts with dozens
of children present, working together to set up and take down the beach each day. Still other skills in communication, in public speaking and having the capability to talk to any person, toddler through elderly, from anywhere, about anything, for extended periods of time.

Going into this internship I was expecting to just follow directions and fulfill the same duties as prior environmental interns. While initially surprising, I benefitted greatly from this proving to be false. Instead, I was able to take this internship and really make it my own. I took on several more responsibilities between running technical aspects of the weekly teachings, Eucharist, and variety show, choosing to take on the added arts and crafts responsibility, creating and developing the recycling program, and going out of my way to put every effort into everything. I believe the biggest difference I made was by leaving a legacy of diligence, creativity, determination, and commitment for the following interns to embrace and also make their own just as I did.

This environmental internship definitely led me to reevaluate my career goals. While I have always had a passion for the environment, actually getting to research extensively, teach environmental education, and work hands on with it, pushed me in a new direction career-wise. Since returning to Sewanee it has become abundantly clear to me that some sort of environmental studies need to be a part of my major course
of study. Furthermore my eyes were opened to opportunities I was previously unaware of, such as environmental ministry.

In conclusion, I could not feel more blessed to have had this incredible opportunity. Every day I was greeted by the sunrise on the ocean, and every night I watched the sunset from the windows during our staff meetings. The amazing beauty of the island was only rivaled by the inner beauty of my fellow staff members, with whom I lived, worked, prayed, and discovered with. To be surrounded 24/7 by a group of people who unconditionally love you, the island, and every family that came to us, is truly a powerful thing. This summer required a ton of work and perseverance but such paid off in ten-fold in fun, success, and happiness.