

Catalyst Profile
Danielle Crocker

Danielle Crocker, who graduated from WCU in 2014, has chased her dream of being a conservationist across the country, and then some. From Indiana to Alaska, this WCU alumna has fought for her chance to work with the sun at her back in a wildlife-oriented position.

Before scoring a position with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, she was a Catamount. After finishing up a two-year degree at Haywood Community College, Crocker enrolled in WCU's Natural Resource and Conservation Management Program.

In pursuit of "opened doors," she put her all into Associate Professor Peter Bates' courses, spending hours surveying local land alongside 15 to 20 peers. Rather than lecturing, Bates pushed Crocker to be a "forestry professional," allowing her to inventory plots of land, from the subsoil to the treetops.

To get her "foot in the door," this Murphy, North Carolina native also doggedly pursued field experience beyond her prescribed curriculum. Even before starting college, she walked into the North Carolina Forest Service Office, begging to volunteer.

"I'd do anything: plant trees, vacuum, take out the trash," said Crocker. "Anything for a chance."

Crocker finally got her big break when a professor directed her attention to an office administration position with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As an intern, she collaborated with a team of 13 biologists, editing reports, and working on stream restoration projects. Much of her time was also dedicated to "Kids in the Creek," an educational program for fifth graders.

From there, the alumna began chasing seasonal jobs around the country. For six-month stints, she moved to Utah, Georgia, and Indiana. Crocker also studied spawning salmon in Alaska for a stretch of time.

"Moving around was unpredictable and intimidating," said Crocker. "But I know each opportunity has prepared me for the next and enriched my life overall."

Now, as a conversation technician with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, Crocker is permanently stationed 40 minutes east of Asheville. Days are spent outdoors, scouting streams for heavy sediment loads, dams and, oddly enough, cows.

The conservation project involves collecting endangered mussels, raising them in holding tanks and eventually releasing them. As an "indicator species," the freshwater clams contribute to a healthy ecosystem, helping nongame fish like minnows.

Though Crocker's time at WCU boosted her odds in the competitive field of forestry, she suggests that current students be "proactive" and do a bit of legwork.

"Employers just want to see that you can commit to something for four years," said Crocker. "But your experiences are more important than a piece of paper."