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“It all started with a pile of sand” is exactly how I was advised not to start my essay. It was the first day on the job and I was excited to begin my summer-long conservation internship. My first task was to fill armadillo holes with sand to ensure that visitors would not leave with a broken ankle. On that first day the task appeared to me as a simple preparation for the annual native plant sell. Today, I realized that those types of tasks are very similar to most conservation work. Before my internship, I had an elementary understanding of conservation work where projects are executed and then finished. Now I realized conservation work is rarely ever “finished” and that there are many levels that are rarely recognized.

Human activities have impeded nature’s ability to function properly on its own accord, so much that conservationists have to frequently intervene. One such activity has been the introduction of nonnative plants into local environments for landscaping purposes or some ill-advised conservation plan. Many of these nonnative species have become invasive and often outcompete our native species. The only way to remove these invasive plants is through the painstaking work done by conservationists. Before my internship I did not realize how incredibly difficult it is to completely remove an invasive species. I spent many days with my fellow interns removing invasive plants. Even though we removed virtually every plant we saw, they eventually returned and continued to pose a threat to the native habitat. There will always be a plant that was missed or a pesky seed bank that will patiently wait for the perfect chance to begin the invasive cycle anew.

While I have always known that invasive plants were threats, I was uninformed as to why native plants were of tremendous importance. The most important realization I had at Strawberry Plains was the value of native plants and the impact they have on wildlife. Even though I have been interested in wildlife for quite a while, it never registered to me that they not only need habitat to survive, they need a native habitat. The relationships that animals share with plants is astounding to me. For example, the only plant that monarch butterflies will lay their eggs on is milkweed. The milkweed population has seen a drastic decline in recent years, and as result the monarch butterfly population has also declined. The population has declined so severely that some wildlife biologists speculate that it is too late to save the beloved butterfly species. This is just one of many consequences that has happened because of the disappearance of many local species.

Fear not because the planet is not completely doomed. There are ways to reverse the negative direction our environment is heading. Ordinary people like myself are able to make an impact. Being the aspiring conservationist that I am, I decided this summer that I wanted to do something about the disappearance of native plants by starting a garden. I dedicated several areas in my yard as native plant gardens and tried to educate my friends and family to do the same. This simple task could literally be the difference between a beloved species going extinct or being around for future generations to enjoy.

My time at Strawberry Plains wasn’t spent learning just about all the problems that plague our natural world. It was a time for me to explore my personal interests and learn more about myself. One of the reasons I wanted to work for Audubon was because a huge part of their organization is dedicated to protecting birds. As a bird enthusiast, I really enjoyed working for an organization that places great emphasis on birds in their conservation teaching and practices. I spent my summer watching birds in their native habitat that was restored by Strawberry Plains. I

would often take pauses during my work to try and spot new birds or learn a new song or call. Even though I really enjoyed the birds this summer, my experience was more than that.

Audubon is not just a nature sanctuary for birds to enjoy, but a center where the public can come to learn and appreciate nature. This summer the public included a group of kids for the annual kids' camp. I dreaded working that week the entire summer because, based on previous experiences, I did not enjoy supervising children. However, that week quickly became my favorite week of my internship. The kids were incredibly intelligent and fun to be around. I found it interesting that the kids and adults were able to learn from each other. I would often tell one of the campers a nature fact and they would in turn one-up me with a fact.

My experience at Strawberry Plains is one that I will always appreciate and remember. I would like to thank all the staff at the Strawberry Plains Audubon Center for allowing me the opportunity to work there this summer. I would like to personally thank Mitch Robinson and Kristin Lamberson for the support they provided me and the other interns and also for their personal investment in our success. This experience has helped me shape my goals for the future and I look forward to using what I learned in my future conservation career.