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Monday, July 11, 2016

My Summer of Science and Oysters

Charlotte Shade, 2017 Cohort

When the children of Dayton tour our River Mobile, the first station they stop at is a large map of the United States to learn how the rivers are connected to one another. They learn that our Great Miami River empties into the Ohio River, which then joins with the Mississippi River, and finally ends its journey as the Mississippi River spills into the Gulf of Mexico. This summer I find myself working in the very same place where the water from the Great Miami River ends its travels: the Gulf of Mexico.



This summer I have been living on Dauphin Island in southern Alabama, working for the Dauphin Island Sea Lab's (DISL) Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) program funded by the National Science Foundation. I have found myself conducting research in aquaculture studies, a field that is rarely thought about in the land-locked Midwest. I have been conducting a research project in collaboration with the Auburn University Shellfish Lab (AUSL) to understand how Eastern Oyster shells recover from the unsightly "blisters" caused by the burrowing worm *Polydora webstri*, commonly known as a mud worm.



This research opportunity has given me the very unique experience (for a Midwestern girl like myself) to learn, not only about marine sciences, but also a community that is built around the water. Back in 2005, Hurricane Katrina damaged the areas around Dauphin Island and Mobile, Alabama and the economy has slowly been rebuilding since the natural disaster. The goal of AUSL is to help start oyster farms around the Gulf of Mexico as a new industry to grow the economy in the south. The number of oyster farms has grown from about five farms to thirteen farms today. Research projects like my own and the many graduate students that study through AUSL aim to help the farmers grow oysters more sustainably and efficiently, so that southern oysters can be just as, if not more marketable, on the lucrative half-shell market across the nation.



I have truly enjoyed conducting research in an applied science field that has allowed me to interact with local farmers and turn their, perhaps, “not-so-scientific-questions” into a publishable research project. It has been great to use my community building skills that I learned through River Stewards to work with the oyster farmers through AUSL where they constantly provide instruction, research and outreach in the area of shellfish ecology and production to the citizens of the Mobile Bay region. It amazes me that no matter where I travel to in this country I can still find communities that value their water sources just as much as Dayton. The love for our waterways and its resources can be felt from the Great Miami all the way at the end here in Gulf of Mexico.