The Future of SAF

Rebeca Rodriguez: Finding a Path in Forestry

Editor’s note: Continuing with our profiles of up-and-coming SAF members who will continue managing our nation’s natural resources in the coming decades, this month we feature Rebeca Rodriguez. She is an undergraduate at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA) and will graduate this summer with a bachelor’s degree in forestry with a concentration in forest recreation management. In 2016, she joined SAF and was selected as an SAF Diversity Scholar in 2018 (for information on the scholarship, see tinyurl.com/yy7g4rvj). She also served as the treasurer of SFA’s SAF student chapter for two years.

In her own words, Rodriguez describes her path toward a career in forestry and recreation.

By Rebeca Rodriguez

How she developed an appreciation for the outdoors

While I was growing up in Houston, Texas, my parents never took my brother and me to any state parks or national parks; even going to the city park was a rare thing, because they didn’t feel comfortable going to those places. Being Hispanic and not really knowing a lot of English, it was hard for my parents to go to one of these parks, because oftentimes there wasn’t someone who spoke Spanish there. In all honesty, growing up, I disliked being outdoors, because it was hot and humid. I didn’t have an appreciation for nature, because I had never experienced it enough to develop a connection.

It wasn’t until my senior year of high school that I developed this connection to nature. I was in an AP Environmental Science class, for which we got extra credit if we joined the Envirothon club. Envirothon has four main sections: aquatic ecology, soil/land use, wildlife, and forestry. Ironically, I was the person who specialized in forestry. Because of this club, I was able to learn about these four topics through hands-on experiences outside of a classroom setting. This was the first time I ever touched a fish
or held a frog. Our teacher taught us how to classify soil by touching it, but also tasting it if needed, and I learned how to identify trees and their uses. This is what helped me figure out that I wanted to major in forestry.

What she’s learned through the forestry program

While at SFA, I have had many opportunities to learn about things I had never even thought of before from professors who have spent years in the field and acquired real-world knowledge on their subject. One of the most important classes I’ve taken was Environmental Attitudes and Issues. This class sticks out to me because we learned that to change someone’s behavior, you first have to change their attitude about the topic. It was in this class that I first realized what I wanted to do that in my life—I would love to educate people on the outdoors and, hopefully, get them to acknowledge its greatness.

In the summer of 2018, I worked at The Pines Catholic Camp as a camp counselor. In this job, I learned how to communicate with all different types of people, as well as with different age groups. I lead recreational activities, such as zip lining, kayaking, rock climbing, logrolling, and other fun summer-camp activities. I saw the importance of human dimensions, as well as the importance of educating younger generations about natural resources. During the school year, the camp puts on environmental retreats during which kids learn about forestry, archaeology, limnology, meteorology, entomology, and orienteering. After my graduation in August of 2019, I will work full-time at The Pines. I hope that through this job I will be able to educate the next generation of natural-resources specialists and gain the experience I need to achieve my goals.

What my parents think about my studying natural resources

When I first started at SFA, my parents were extremely confused because I choose to go into the natural-resources field. When growing up, I was never one to show interest in the outdoors. They questioned my decision for a few years, and kept asking me if this was what I actually wanted to do with my life. My answer was always yes. Since I’ve been studying forestry, I’ve become the connection for my parents to the outdoors. I have not been able to get them to a national park yet, but I have taken them to many of the state parks in Texas. I haven’t just affected my parents, but also my entire family. We go on regular fishing trips, nature walks, and occasionally, camping. We went from being a family that stayed indoors to a family that frequents outdoor recreational opportunities.

How would I make state or national parks friendlier for my parents

I think that minorities are so poorly represented in state and national parks because often there are few programs or signage for them. I would love to see these parks have someone on staff who is a native Spanish speaker, because no matter how hard you try, Google Translate will not always make sense. In state-park bathrooms, I have seen signage in Spanish that makes no sense at all and the only way I could figure out what it was trying to say was by referring to the English signs.

The Spanish programs do not have to be the equivalent of the English programs. Starting small is totally fine—just put in the proper resources and time to get it done to the best of your abilities. If a new program is made for the Hispanic population, please advertise it somewhere they will be able to see it. These places could include Facebook, the
local library, or even a grocery store. Use the connections you have to help you, for instance, if you know a native Spanish speaker, maybe ask them to look over a document you wrote in Spanish if you are unsure about it.

**Her career goals and what she hopes to achieve**

I think that recreation is one of the best ways to get people outdoors into nature. They get to do something fun while at the same time taking in the beauty around them. I want to be a part of getting the Hispanic community outdoors. I would love to be that friendly face in parks for Hispanic families to feel welcomed and to know that they have someone who can understand them. This is why I want to go into environmental education or park interpretation; in these jobs, I can put on programs in both Spanish and English to reach a wide range of people.

If I were to go back to school for my master’s degree, I would want to focus more on outdoor recreation and the human dimensions behind it, but focused more on the minorities in recreational areas.

**Why diversity is important in recreation and forestry**

Taking care of the environment is something we should all do, and it’s also something we need to educate the general public about. Outdoor recreation offers us a unique opportunity, in that it can get people outdoors without having to commit too much. The Society of American Foresters has given me the resources I need to move forward in what I want to do with my life. I was a Diversity Scholar in 2018, and at convention, I had the opportunity to meet a very diverse group of people. I loved being able to hear everyone’s opinions on certain topics and seeing how everyone brought something different to the table. That is what I think diversity in natural resources should be, a group of people from all sorts of backgrounds, coming together to accomplish the same goal.

To connect with Rebeca Rodriguez, she can be reached at rebecarod17@gmail.com.