I was standing in the middle of a shallow creek, picking up crawfish and putting them into a bucket. It was a hot summer day in Northern California and there was sweat running down my forehead. After 3 full days of the same thing, I had just about had it. Stand around, wait for direction, talk to people, try to catch fish, then wait again. The worst part of it was that I was getting paid for it all.

I was 21 and working as an environmental technician for a government funded fisheries office at the time, a field for which I had completed a 4 year degree. We had joined forces with two other agencies, making about 15 of us total. We were at the site of a low head dam reconstruction, where, in order to perform the construction the stream channel had to be diverted, dewatering a roughly 30 yard section. The plan was to dig a diversion channel, use a bladder dam to block the main flow, and then the fisheries group would come in and capture any of the juvenile salmon and trout that remained in the leftover puddles. Let me repeat that there were 15 of us there to do this. It should have been a very quick process. However, the bladder dam leaked like a sieve, meaning there was a steady flow of water when there should have been puddles. Instead of waiting for this to be fixed, it was decided to carry on with the task of removing fish. For three full days, the construction crew tried everything they could to stop the leaks, and when that didn’t work they decided to continuously pump the water out. So for 3 days, 15 full grown adults splashed around the creek with nets and buckets. The construction crew would get the water level low, we would run the nets, and then a pump would fail and it would fill back up. Over and over. The few salmon and trout that were present could swim from one pool to another, easily evading us. Eventually I started catching crawdads - mostly out of boredom.

I couldn’t help but think, what the heck am I doing here? There are quite literally thousands of juvenile fish just downstream of us, yet I am trying to save 20 of them here and 90% of those will die before spawning anyways. Not only this, but the price for saving these fish is 360 man-hours of taxpayer money. I look around for like-mindedness but all I see is a bunch of smiling coworkers, proud of what they are doing and certain they are making a worthwhile difference. I had a moment of panic about the field I was in. I like the environment. I enjoy it and want to protect it. However, I do not have enough empathy for the individual fish to justify doing what we were doing. I thought about the future that lied ahead of me. In the environmental field, it seems as if you are either a grunt or a project manager. Most of a project manager’s job is convincing the powers that be that his or her project is worth funding. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to be the one who decides what is necessary and what is not. How could I convince people that to give me funding when I myself am not convinced it is necessary. How could I lead a group of people in a project when I lacked the passion that they had. I really began to doubt if I cared enough to stay in the environmental field.

Then, I realized that most of my time on the dam project, my mind was focused on the diversion process, ways that we could patch the dam, and how I would do it differently if I could start from the beginning. I thought about the fish hatcheries, fish ladders and passages, and other dams that I had seen. All of these things had been built by humans in order to protect the environment, or at least could be built in a way that would least impact it. I wanted to be designing and building these kinds of projects, not sitting in a conference room trying to get funding! I realized that I was not the kind of person you would want to be explaining why an environmental project should be done, but I was much better suited to explain how it should be done. This was one of the many moments that prompted me to go back to school for civil engineering. As a civil engineer, I can remain in the environmental field while doing what I am passionate about. Before this point in time I was going with the flow of life and headed down a path that deep down I did not want to pursue, feeling stuck there because that is what I had decided. All it took was a few days of standing in the flow to direct me to where I am today. Though I still have yet to graduate, I am currently working in a much more engineering centered field. I can now say that I am proud of the type of work that I do and confident that I am making a difference.