Chris Talbot – Personal Statement, University of Michigan
Ecology & Evolutionary Biology PhD

Background

My first lesson in rapid environmental change came at age four. After our eviction, my family began migrating from couch to couch. I adapted to housing and food insecurity, continuous theft by my father as he pawned our belongings to pay for his next high, and transfers from one school district to another as we evaded him.

Luckily, amidst the chaos, I found refuges that nurtured my growth and offered stability, allowing me to persist through tough times. The local zoo emphasized the beauty and value of the natural world, instilling in me a commitment to environmental stewardship and a fascination with nature. The band room offered a community and a team, developing my interpersonal skills and offering a support network. My old hand-me-down laptop introduced me to programming, laying the foundation for my computational skills and igniting my love for problem-solving. I overcame my adverse childhood experiences and became a master of resilience to change. It's fitting, then, that I would find my calling studying *biological adaptation to rapid change*.

Trajectory Leading to Graduate School

In high school, my father took his life. My refuges failed to keep me grounded. After dropping out and working grueling and unfulfilling jobs, though, I decided to return to school. As a low-income first-generation student, I learned to navigate academia without familial support.

I completed an Associate's degree focused on computer science, but I wanted to better align my career goals with my care for nature. I declared a major in Ecology, Evolution, and Biodiversity at the University of Michigan, seeking to leverage my quantitative skills to solve environmental issues. Through research experience, I found ways to do so and discovered a passion for scientific inquiry. With the support of my mentors, I explored various facets of biological and computational research, developing broad, interdisciplinary skills and interests. I've since narrowed my research interests to population genetics, a field I believe best marries my computational and environmental skills and interests. I'm excited to pursue a career that satisfies my intellectual curiosity while keeping a broader purpose in mind.

Community Engagement

Beyond my pursuit of meaningful, fulfilling research, I've found fulfillment in identifying ways to generate communities of belonging through volunteering and work. I've tutored adult learners in math and language arts in community college, led field trips for various age groups at Matthaei Botanical Gardens, and mentored community college transfer students at Michigan. As a PhD student, I will continue identifying ways to engage the broader community with science, such as the bI/O program, which engages incarcerated students with cutting-edge Michigan research.

My adverse experiences have strengthened my resilience and determination, taught me the importance of aligning my work with my passions, and ultimately led me to a path where I can contribute meaningfully to science and society. I look forward to continuing to foster vibrant, inclusive environments at Michigan while studying rapid environmental change, something close to my heart.