PERSONAL STATEMENT
Sophie Wulfing, Indonesia, Fisheries

My passion for travel didn't come from going to exotic places as a kid, but instead the constant "musical rooms" that was the reality of a home with five siblings and a revolving door of foster children. Every few months there would be a change to our home's ecosystem and with excitement I'd pack up and move to a different bed in a different room, getting to know a new roommate. Instead of struggling to make friends in school, I thrived in a continuously evolving family pack of what would make up an entire baseball team. Living in Washington state, we took for granted the beautiful lakes and forests in our backyard that seemed built for our entertainment. Looking back, my childhood almost seems magical, full of forts, fishing, and an unlimited supply of new friends from different backgrounds. In the woods of the Pacific Northwest, I fell in love with the outdoors, and with meeting new people and perspectives.

This is probably why the best job I've ever had was my internship for the Fisheries Division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 2017, where I quantified fish stocks to set up next years' quotas while working and living on a commercial fishing vessel. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't anxious about sharing a living space with people who have a reputation of opposing conservation and a contempt for scientists, but those notions of fishermen completely dissipated when I found myself among some of the most genuine and side-splittingly hilarious people I've ever met. We often talked about how fishing regulations directly affect their businesses, and how laws often impede fishing activity with unforeseen consequences for their community. While engaging in these conversations, I was also exposed to mathematical modeling, computer coding, and the world of quantitative biology. I wrote my first scientific paper on models of aurora rockfish and taught myself the statistical program R. It felt like putting pieces of a puzzle in place - while gaining research expertise, I also learned how complex environmental issues can be and that it's easy to approach conservation from an academic ivory tower, but much more difficult to consider the humanity and needs of the people most reliant on these resources. This understanding is essential to enacting meaningful environmental change, and something that scientists must consider when influencing lawmakers and stakeholders. For the first time, I was able to combine my passion for sustainability, adventure, and bringing people together with my love of numbers, and it felt amazing to have a concrete direction in planning what I wanted to do next. I learned that biologists, economists, and industry workers can all come together with the shared goal of fisheries conservation.

Ever since, I have tried to approach conservation from a point of view that considers the people directly affected by environmental change. After studying abroad in Costa Rica, I realized I had spent my time with my fellow students from the US and had limited my ability to learn Spanish. I then returned to work on a genetics project in Colombia to truly learn Spanish and engage more fully with the people and culture that I was living in. Because of this, I was able to hear about the complications Colombia faces in the threat of climate change. The people I met had wide ranging views on how to balance this issue with economic growth and human rights, as well as how a history of colonialism had exacerbated the issues they face today. These were all conversations I would not be able to have without speaking the language, and I know now that in order to understand all sides of an issue, you need to meet people halfway.

All these experiences have made me a better scientist. Not just because of the methods or math that I learned, but also the realization that each place has a unique combination of environmental and social issues in the threat of ecological collapse. Addressing these complexities is the only way to write ecological success stories.