PERSONAL STATEMENT

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“Assessing predator-prey relationships in global fisheries”

I recall vividly the first time I held a juvenile shark in my hands. I felt the adrenaline pumping through my body and recall the smile that quickly emerged. I was in the Bahamas at the time, and I knew at that moment that working with and studying sharks was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. My subsequent study of sharks for four years, in captivity and in the wild, has confirmed this commitment for me.

Before my experience with sharks, I began my college career at Scottsdale Community College. Already I was wondering how I could become involved in marine biology research, a longtime interest of mine, especially since all my educational opportunities were in the Arizona desert. In fall 2008, I began work at the Phoenix Zoo in a stingray and shark exhibit. Although I was very happy with my job at the zoo, taking care of the animals and giving presentations to the public, I knew that I did not simply want to share knowledge others had discovered; I wanted to discover and explore the questions of science for myself.

In fall 2009, I was introduced to scientific research. I began by exploring the population dynamics of a wolf and moose predator-prey system with my current advisor, Professor John Nagy, who is a professor at Scottsdale Community College and a lecturer at Arizona State University, where I am completing my studies. My focus shifted from purely biological research to a broader training in mathematics and statistics. The mathematical skills and intuition I developed relating to the wolf-moose studies were easily transferable to research in the ocean, as I discovered a year later when I went to the Bahamas as an intern studying shark populations. I spent three months catching, tagging, and tracking sharks, very much a dream come true. Here is where I had my wonderful first experience with the juvenile shark. The lab in the Bahamas invited me to work the following year at locations in Florida and two islands in the Bahamas, which I did, catching and tracking sharks. The thrill of this second internship was that these sharks were quite a bit bigger than during my first internship, some upwards of four meters.

After my second trip to the Bahamas, I was employed by Arizona State University, where I had by that time become a student, to continue my research with Professor Nagy. Focusing on the data I helped collect in the Bahamas, I shifted my work with him to construct mathematical models that allowed me to answer questions about the shark population dynamics that otherwise are difficult to elucidate. Specifically, I asked, is this population at risk of extinction, and what can be done to better manage and protect this population of sharks? I have finalized this work with a now pending publication. I presented my research at various symposiums and conferences, reigniting my interest in teaching. As a result, I began working as a teaching assistant for Professor Nagy in his introductory class on biological research. Although I found teaching to be hard work, it was also highly rewarding. Seeing the sudden excitement in students’ eyes and their ensuing smiles when they suddenly become hooked on conducting research reminds me of that first time I held a shark in my hands while working in the Bahamas.

Outside of school and research, I enjoy hiking, camping, rock climbing and scuba diving. I am thrilled that British Columbia is a premier spot for all these outdoor activities. I will be able to dive with the UVic Scuba Club and hike and rock climb at the popular Mt. Wells on Victoria Island. My interest in these types of activities actually serves a greater purpose besides being just a good time. I am also able to connect with individuals I meet during these sports and often discuss my research with them, a meaningful way for me to interact with Canadians.