“How many siblings do you have?” is a commonly asked question when meeting new people yet it’s a question that I can find difficult to answer. Growing up, my family helped raise foster kids so the number of siblings I had at any given moment could range from three to seven, depending on when you asked me. From this experience, I find I am often frustrated by the representation of foster care and the children who have actually had that experience in the movies and TV shows. They are often painted as a lost cause and victim of circumstance or a person not well adjusted to everyday adult life, yet watching the people who I’ve grown up with in adult life has shown me that people are more nuanced and multi-dimensional than we often make them out to be.

Despite pursuing mathematics and biology, I have always been interested in people, the wide range of backgrounds and personalities that can form into drastically different perspectives on the same issues. Fisheries research is a one such microcosm of this, where both conservationists and alike have the potential to come together to address an issue, as long as both needs are being considered in decision making.

I was first exposed to this idea in 2017 when I interned for the Fisheries Division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Here, I worked directly with fishermen to quantify stock status to set up the next year’s fishing quota off. It is a summer-long survey that spans the entire west coast of the United States where you’re fishing for over a week at a time on commercial fishing vessels. Here, I lived side by side with fishermen in the industry, we worked together to bring up, sort, and measure catch, and we laughed often over meals and drinks during our breaks. People often warned me about being a woman working so closely with this crew and I have to admit, I shared their concern going into the project. Quite on the contrary, however, I found them to be incredibly respectful, fun, and easygoing. Instead of bringing a privileged and educated perspective to the boat as I had prepared to do, I found myself learning a lot about their experiences in the industry and especially their incredibly nuanced opinions of fishing restrictions and government interventions. Each person I worked with viewed conservation and the people trying to impose it differently and I learned very quickly that we all have similar goals when it comes to resource protection and not to treat groups of people as a monolith of either affirming or opposing your own views.

After earning my undergraduate degree, I moved to the marshland of southern Louisiana. Even though I wasn’t working directly in fisheries, I met many Cajun fishermen who were watching not only their culture and language disappear due lack of resources and years of discriminatory laws, but also their very homeland. The Louisiana marsh is the fastest disappearing land mass in the world, and every person I became spoke to had a deep cultural connection to their land and a vast wealth of knowledge of fishing and the wildlife of Louisiana. Louisiana faces some of the most challenging ecological issues and I was yet again surprised at how deeply these issues affected them, and how solutions to this problem cannot come from one side.

Currently, my thesis is studying small scale fisheries and how to use the specific culture of the specific fishers to make informed and effective regulations. I hope to continue to learn from the people around me as to how to be a better, more rounded scientist

The environmental issue of fisheries conservation represents a unique intersection between the economic drivers of harvest, the ecological ramifications of harvest and of course, the cultural context people bring to their fishing views and practices. Whether that be large-scale fishing boats off the West Coast of the United States, shrimpers in the Cajun south, or a subsistence fisher in Madagascar or Indonesia, each individual fishery presents its own challenges, yet all represent a unique and integral part of the culture that interacts with it. A Fulbright grant to continue this work in Indonesia will help me continue to approach conservation from a multidimensional point of view and allow me to learn from the vast network of fishers that make their livings there.