Some opportunities come out of the most unexpected places, and a single experience can completely alter your perspective of the world. To me, this occurred in 2017 when I interned for the Fisheries Division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Originally thinking I was going to study forestry or climate patterns; I was struggling to find a summer internship and took the first opportunity I could. Much to my surprise, this job changed the course of my life forever. Here, I was first exposed to mathematical modelling, computer coding, and was exposed to the world of quantitative biology. I got to work with mathematicians, biologists and economists who all develop these population models. I learned that that is exactly what I want to with my career, and it feels amazing to have a concrete direction. But that’s actually not the most drastic change of heart I experienced that summer.

There was also a field component to this internship. Every year, NOAA does a survey of commercial fishing regions to quantify the amount of each species of fish in order to set up next years’ quotas. To do this, the scientists at NOAA work with commercial fisherman to catch harvested species and assess the biodiversity of our oceans. This meant working and living on a commercial fishing vessel for a few weeks. When I explain this to people, the conversation often goes something like “You lived with fishermen? How was that, were they… you know, respectful?” I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have those same reservations beforehand. However, after living with all of them in close quarters, I got a whole new perspective. On a fishing boat, you’re often out there for months at a time, doing hard labor and you get a lot of face time with the others on the boat, whether you want to or not. This creates a very unique work culture that is hard to fully encapsulate. There’s a sort of comradery and “tell it like it is” that attitude that is necessary in dangerous and strenuous work conditions. Despite this, they were hands-down the funniest people I’ve ever met. Almost everything that came out of their mouths was a joke and I think I spent more time laughing than actually working. I think this light-hearted attitude is a product of the combination of fishing being one of the most dangerous jobs in America and you’re essentially sharing a one-bedroom apartment that smells bad with six other people. They spoke a lot about how much they love doing survey because they meet people who look and think differently than the people they typically encounter in the small fishing towns they’re from.

tI learned more than I ever thought I would in that internship. How to manage and analyze large data sets, the complexity of the fisheries industry, how to open a beer bottle with your wedding ring, etc. However, I think my biggest takeaway is that I love when people surprise me. Like everyone, I go into new situations with my own assumptions and worries as to how things are going to turn out and what kind of people I’m dealing with but I’ve found that I’m almost always wrong. Whatever notions of fishermen I had before the boat completely dissipated when I found myself among some of the most genuine, loving, and side-splittingly hilarious people I’ve met in my lifetime. It taught me to pay attention and treasure the moments when I realize I am wrong about who people are and what they can bring to the table.

Ever since, I have tried to approach conservation from a more nuanced point of view and have always tried to engage with the people directly affected by environmental change. It was soon after that I went abroad for my first time to Costa Rica and then to Germany. In both of these places, I learned how thrilling it is to live in other countries. Especially because learning a new language opens up the opportunity to meet many different people, all with unique experiences with the environment. I feel it is such a privilege to meet and learn from all different perspectives, and I would be humbled at the opportunity to learn about the experiences of the people involved in Indonesia’s fisheries.