

## Personal Statement

Tanya Lama, Spain, Biology

My fascination with the natural world started at an early age. One of my first nature experiences was a visit to the monarch butterfly overwintering grounds in central Mexico. A UNESCO World Heritage site, millions of butterflies weigh down the cool damp branches of the oyamel trees every winter from November to March. I was eight, and my family had just relocated from Connecticut to Monterrey, Mexico. A bustling metropolis two hours from the US-Mexico border, Monterrey is a beacon of industrialization surrounded by the Sierra Madre mountains. For the next decade our family shuttled between Mexico, the U.S., and spent summers in Chile visiting family. By my eighteenth birthday, the monarch population had declined by a staggering 92% and scientists across the globe were sounding the alarm about unprecedented rates of species extinction.

That year, I joined my sister at the University of Connecticut as a Division I student-athlete majoring in Environmental Conservation. Inspired by weekends exploring the Sierra Madre mountains, I felt deeply inspired by the beauty of nature and driven to secure a future for the landscapes that had shaped my childhood. I quickly found my purpose at UConn, joining the UConn Honors Program, engaging deeply in my coursework, and conducting toxicology research for my undergraduate thesis. If opportunities arose to participate in fieldwork, learn a new technique in the lab, or meet someone new I said “yes” and gained skills and a network of passionate colleagues and mentors. On one such occasion, I agreed to attend an introductory hunting and fishing class for young women. I met my future graduate advisor on that trip, and later became a certified hunter safety instructor myself.

Dr. Curt Griffin offered me a MSc research position at UMass Amherst, and the day after graduating from UConn I was in Botswana studying stress hormones and ecotourism with African elephants. This experience was incredibly transformative and affirmed my passion for both science and community. For six months, I lived in a tent at a remote field station in the Okavango Delta, and yet I never felt alone. While the scenery was stunning, I was blown away by the openness with which my small community and my dedicated field technicians welcomed me and invested in my success and well-being. I would often come home from long, hot days in the savanna to an invitation to sit around the fire, and a plate of leftovers from a kind neighbor.

I soon embarked on a new endeavor and began pursuing my PhD at UMass using genetic assessments to inform timely and effective recovery plans for at-risk populations of Canada lynx. Spain’s recovery program for the closely-related Iberian lynx is one of the most scientifically advanced initiatives in the world, and would serve as an incredible model for our budding U.S. recovery program. Dr. Jose Antonio Godoy and I were introduced to one another last year and have been discussing opportunities for collaboration and bilateral knowledge-exchange between UMass Amherst and the Doñana Biological Station ever since. The Fulbright would allow me to work side-by-side with Dr. Godoy in Seville and become fully immersed in daily life there, monitoring the recovery of the Doñana National Park and Cardena Andújar lynx populations using non-invasive molecular analyses. Ultimately, my career goal is to contribute to endangered species recovery as a conservation geneticist. Skills gained through the Fulbright will qualify me to work in the most cutting-edge recovery programs in the world. On a personal level, I’m excited about experiencing every-day life in Seville and outside of research, I plan on engaging deeply with my host community through art. I have been practicing ceramics for fifteen years, and Seville has an incredibly rich history of craftsmanship evident by the ornate mosaics and tiles (*azulejos*) that adorn the city. In my experience, art spaces are fertile ground for building community and engaging with people of all ages and from all walks of life. If accepted, I look forward to joining a community studio in Seville hosted by local artist Yoko Akabane.