

MOUNTAINS

Teen conservation leaders get new perspective



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Phoebe June Carnes is starting out her senior year at Swain County High School in Bryson City with a new outlook and new friends from around the region and beyond, thanks to a summer internship at Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

“My favorite part of the experience was the bonds we got to build with one another,” she said. “It’s one thing to do a bunch of fun activities by yourself — but doing them in a tightly knit group made it all the more enjoyable.”

Phoebe was one of eight high school interns who came to the park from North Carolina, Tennessee, and as far away as New York to be Teen Leaders in Conservation. These high school students are paid a stipend to do hands-on work with park divisions like historic preservation, trails, vegetation management, wetlands monitoring, and wildlife. The internships are provided in partnership with AmeriCorps and American Conservation Experience (ACE).

“These programs are designed to introduce young people from all different backgrounds to the national park experience — not just students who have grown up being around parks, but also youth from urban or rural areas who have never before gotten to experience a park,” said Education Technician Natriefia Miller, who coordinated the internship program on the North Carolina side of the park with assistance from co-leader Chelsea Tharp, herself a college intern from ACE.

“I benefited by being able to put my leadership skills into action as co-leader with Natriefia,” Chelsea said. “One specific moment that was important to me was when I realized that I was confidently able to help teach and learn simultaneously. I began to realize how my past experiences and skills have helped me to lead in this kind of role.”

In addition to working closely with Chelsea, Phoebe deepened her friendship with Stella Walborn, also of Whittier, NC.

“I learned that I want to keep the park service in my mind as a career choice,” said Stella. Now back at Jackson County Early College, a public high school in

Sylva, NC, she hopes to attend Western Carolina University. “I liked working with the people from fisheries, catching and identifying fish and learning about the different fish that are native to the Smoky Mountains.”

Phoebe got to practice her photography skills while in the park and wrote a paper about elk management that will be accompanied by her own images of these magnificent creatures, reintroduced to the Great Smoky Mountains 20 years ago this fall.

“I could have been happy hanging out with wildlife throughout the duration of the internship,” she said. “But I was excited to take a dive into other jobs in the park as well. I was curious to see what really went into running a national park, and to see the different jobs in some of my favorite scientific fields.”

Already an exceptional communicator, Phoebe liked the fact that the internship emphasized good communication.

“We were able to talk through the activities we did and change it up a bit if we really wanted to,” she said. “This helped ensure that we were doing things we enjoyed and that would benefit us in the long run.”

Teen Leaders in Conservation often say their experiences in the Smokies help them determine what type of career they want to explore. Phoebe already knew she wanted to pursue a degree in wildlife biology at the University of North Carolina — Asheville with a specialization in herpetology. But the internship has her thinking about continuing to volunteer with the park as she approaches her senior year of high school.

“As far as future occupations are concerned, I am considering a temporary job within the park service once I graduate college,” she said. “It would be a good opportunity for me to gain more experience in the education field as I build my own wildlife education brand, and I think that it would be really fun!”

Find information about park internships for next summer online through the American Conservation Experience at usconservation.org or AmeriCorps at americorps.gov.

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at SmokiesInformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.



Great Smoky Mountains National Park summer intern Phoebe Carnes of Whittier struggles to loosen a large underground rock with a pry bar while repairing a fence at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



Chelsea Tharp, Stella Walborn and Phoebe Carnes laugh as they attempt to make cornshuck dolls.



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