

Courtney Wright
AAFV Scholarship Report

Being over halfway done with my fourth year of veterinary school is surreal. “The real world” has never been closer. Yet instead of fear, I find myself inspired and excited for what lies ahead. Four years ago, I entered veterinary school unsure of the type of veterinarian I wanted to be. I had experiences in small animal, large animal, and equine medicine. These are all fields I highly respect, yet all fields I could not quite picture myself in long-term. Then, I discovered fish health and aquaculture and I instantly knew I had to learn more. I am fortunate that my veterinary school gave me the flexibility to plan rotations that immersed me in aquatics, as I am truly excited to pursue this field. Thanks to the American Association of Fish Veterinarians Student Scholarship Program, I was able to explore many different aspects of fish health and medicine and continue to refine my veterinary career goals.

My first aquatics rotation took me to Chattanooga, Tennessee where I worked with Dr. Chris Keller at Tennessee Aquarium for two weeks. Almost immediately after arriving, I was evaluating a crocodile’s fecal float and necropsying a turtle. Each day typically consisted of spending a morning or afternoon with aquarium husbandry staff or Dr. Keller, who are incredibly knowledgeable about fish health and were always willing to teach me about aquatic animal husbandry and health standards. I learned about quarantine protocols; water quality parameters and how to test them; system maintenance; basic nutritional requirements for aquarium species; enrichment techniques; and more. I was humbled to be working with so many knowledgeable individuals and to gain experience with truly unique animals.

I then traveled to Buhl, Idaho to spend a month at Clear Springs Foods to learn about aquaculture from a private business perspective. Clear Springs Foods ships out 25 million pounds of rainbow trout every year and is the largest producer of rainbow trout in the world. Such a large company could easily feel overwhelming but Dr. Stephen Reichley, who is the Director of Fish Health, designed the rotation with the goal of giving me a holistic view of the company. During my four weeks, I was given comprehensive experience with the production of food fish from start to finish. I gained knowledge of the unique challenges of egg production, how to administer treatments to raceways, refined my diagnostic skills, and learned how to establish parameters for identifying raceways that require health evaluations. In addition to working directly on the farms, I met with many different departments of the company such as the marketing team, processing plant and feed mill. This was very useful as it taught me why there’s more to being a fish veterinarian than simply fish health.

My time in the northwest United States continued as I ventured further west to Seattle, Washington to spend a month at The University of Washington’s Department of Comparative Medicine (DCM). Here, I learned about zebrafish from Dr. George Sanders. Research has developed into a strong passion of mine in veterinary school and I was excited to learn about a fish veterinarian’s role in research. I spent time discussing research methods and techniques with personal investigators and lab employees as well as critically evaluating laboratory protocols to ensure animal health and welfare. I learned how to assess a rack’s water supply by tracing the flow of water, how to evaluate and apply the different filtration methods that can be used in a research setting, and how to assess pertinent water quality parameters. Dr. Sanders stressed the importance of being familiar with the different systems in a research lab and the unique challenges that are associated with fish in research. He additionally stressed the importance of understanding a facility’s structural design and how that affects the types of systems that can be used.

I then traveled to Lacey, Washington to spend a month with Dr. Nora Hickey, who is the Program Veterinarian with Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. Dr. Hickey had me jump into action by sorting fish ready to spawn and collecting kidney and spleen biopsies for routine disease surveillance. She additionally taught me how to perform nonlethal sampling to collect skin and gill biopsies for health

monitoring. Dr. Hickey's enthusiasm for veterinary medicine is palpable and she was always willing to provide me with treatment calculation exercises and practice cases to further develop my clinical skills as a budding fish veterinarian. Dr. Hickey also coordinated meetings with other fish health professionals not associated with the commission. I spent a day at Washington State Department of Agriculture where I learned about reportable fish diseases and the role of aquatic veterinarian's role in public health. I spent another day at the Seattle Aquarium where I learned how to perform general anesthesia on fish and how to evaluate animals both on and off display. During this rotation, I was also able to attend a biosecurity workshop put on by Syndel USA, where I learned from various fish health professionals about biosecurity protocols and products that can be used in a hatchery setting.

From feeding stingrays in Chattanooga to walking the raceways in Idaho to spawning chinook in Washington, I can definitely say I am extremely fortunate to have had so many unique and amazing opportunities with fish. Fish health and fish medicine uncovered a passion I had for veterinary medicine I never knew existed, and I am excited to continue learning about this career field in the coming years. It is simply not possible to write about everything I learned, and I want to thank all of the veterinarians and fish health professionals at the various facilities I rotated through for taking the time to teach me and shape my veterinary career. Additionally, I cannot thank the American Association of Fish Veterinarians Student Scholarship Program enough. Not only does this program provide the tangible monetary support to students, but it more importantly gives the intangible support for students pursuing a relatively unexplored career path. So, thank you again, board members and donating AAFV members, for providing me with the opportunity to deepen my knowledge of fish medicine and further refine my aquatic career goals.

With gratitude,



Courtney Wright

Photos



Above: Walking the walls of a raceway at Clear Springs Foods.

Left: Feeding the stingrays at Tennessee Aquarium!



Above: Practicing non-lethal sampling techniques on anesthetized coho salmon at a tribal hatchery.



Above: Collecting ovarian fluid from chinook salmon for routine disease surveillance at a tribal hatchery.