

Passion for the Environment is Alumna's Life Work

Alexa Fantacone graduated in 2014 from Ramapo College with a major in Environmental Studies and minors in Environmental Science and Public Policy. The Kearny, N.J., native put her studies to good use and served as director of the Teaneck Creek Conservancy in Bergen County for seven years. She is now taking her skills to the Lorrimer Sanctuary in Franklin Lakes where she said she will be "closer to the 'Po!"

What did you do at the Teaneck Conservancy, and what will your role be at the Lorrimer Sanctuary?

At Teaneck Creek Conservancy I was responsible for volunteer management, outreach, oversight of the property and ecological maintenance, event/program development, fundraising and communication. I was the only employee for five years but I was able to hire two other Ramapo grads in later years! My role at Lorrimer Sanctuary as a New Jersey Audubon Sanctuary Director will be similar to my role at Teaneck Creek. I will be responsible for the oversight of the property, education programs, and outreach to volunteers and the community. In addition, I will be working with the New Jersey Audubon's statewide team to implement the organization's conservation priorities focused on connecting all people with nature and stewarding the nature of today for all people of tomorrow.

Tell us about the Sanctuary.

Lorrimer Sanctuary is a New Jersey Audubon property in Franklin Lakes which has a beautiful historic building (parts of which date to the 1700's), a gift shop, interpretive exhibits, a classroom, and 14 acres of woodland property. It was donated to NJ Audubon by Lucine L. Lorrimer in 1956. This site was New Jersey Audubon's first administrative site and nature center. The site also has a 10-acre deer enclosure where we will be restoring the habitat with native plants.

What sparked your interest in pursuing this career?

My interest in the environment was sparked by my love for animals and wildlife. I originally wanted to be a veterinarian but realized my ability to help animals would be limited to one individual at a time. By protecting nature, I am able to steward and help countless individuals of multiple species all at once by providing safe, clean and habitable environment for wildlife.

How important is this work?

This work is crucial in light of the current global environmental crises. A main focus of my career has been to provide education so that we can combat climate change, species extinctions, invasive species and water scarcity and pollution by having an informed public. I have taught people as young as 4 years old and as old as 99 about how to be better stewards of our environment and ensure a healthy planet for our future.

How did your experience at Ramapo lead you to this career?

My experience at Ramapo offered me the opportunity for internships. I worked at the Meadowlands Environment Center as a CO-OP and created my own internship with Paterson Great Falls where I completed the first bird species list for the park. Both were great experiences that helped me gain perspective in environmental education and hands-on data collection, respectively. I credit much of my success to the Environmental Studies Capstone class which was a real-world simulation into working with community members on important topics (my senior year we studied the Ford dumpsite and the Environmental Justice issues for the Ramapough Lenape). I also loved being an active member of clubs on campus and was a student leader of 1STEP and Sustainable Living Facilities.

Any advice for students who wish to pursue careers in environmental studies?

I would tell any students interested in environmental studies that it is a vastly broad area of study and you can be interested in so many topics and still have a focus on the environment. Nature centers, in my experience, can always use people with interests in finance, marketing, curriculum development and even design - environmental studies isn't always the only way in! There are so many facets to this work and a great way to meet potential employers is to volunteer and go to events or programs and network.