

From the cornfields of Illinois to the Serengeti, from an octopus lab to a zoo, my experiences in veterinary medicine and research have shaped my career goals during the past seven years. I have always wanted to work with animals. My initial interest in veterinary medicine was sparked by watching my family's vet care for my pets. I was fascinated by his seeming ability to cure animals from any ill. I have since been introduced to the myriad ways vets help animals and have been captivated by zoological and wildlife medicine.

Initially I wanted to be a small animal vet. I always had cats and dogs, and I envisioned myself caring for the health of other families' pets. Always one to face a goal head-on, I did all I could to learn about my chosen profession. During high school, I worked as a kennel assistant at my local veterinary clinic. In my senior year, I took a class that had me at the clinic to observe appointments and surgeries every other day. I enjoyed the use of science and medical knowledge to solve the various health issues. The following summer, I returned to the vet clinic for a full-time internship. I developed skills in questioning clients about the patient's background, drawing blood, preparing patients for surgery, administering anesthesia and many other technical skills. I gained knowledge about the day to day work in a small animal clinic. The days were a mixture of bad and good, from consoling clients after euthanizing their pet to watching puppies going home after fighting off parvovirus.

My summer internship taught me that work as a small animal vet was not what I wanted to do my entire life. I wanted more variety, more challenges and more opportunities to work outside. I began thinking about all the other careers I dreamed of as a kid and how they revolved around my interest in wildlife. That is when I started researching zoo and wildlife medicine. Upon returning to school, I joined my advisor's research lab looking at the regeneration of arms in octopi. Not only did this lab experience allow me the chance to learn about an amazing group of animals, it also engendered an interest for research.

The following fall semester, I had an experience that became the driving force behind my career goals. I spent the semester in Tanzania and Kenya studying environmental science. Immersed into the local culture, I gained first-hand knowledge of environmental issues in East Africa. I learned from a variety of teachers: leading researchers in conservation, local villagers, and guides on safaris in world famous parks. I came away from the experience with strong relationships with the people and a comprehensive understanding of the web humans and wildlife weave together – each affected by the other. My trip to East Africa generated a desire to work with both people and animals in conservation efforts to benefit both.

When I returned to the States, I had experienced veterinary medicine, research – both laboratory and field - and conservation. I thought I would have to choose from one of these fields I loved until I discovered work that incorporated all three of these fields. I rediscovered zoo and wildlife medicine - a field ripe with opportunities to treat animals, conduct research and have a hand in conservation.

To learn about this specialty, I participated in an internship this past summer at a small zoo. I worked directly with the zoo's veterinary staff daily and assisted one of the vets with his turtle research. Right away I noticed the differences between a small animal practice and zoo medicine. The first was the sheer number of species, which provides a unique challenge since much is still unknown about many species. The vet may need to extrapolate from a similar, better known species to decide on the best treatment. Instead of relying on clients, the vet relies on zookeepers to provide a history of the animal. Zoo vets may have to decide on a course of action based entirely on the word of a zookeeper because of wild animals' instincts to hide any illness or injury. These unique challenges force zoo vets to utilize a broader range of publications and a certain amount of ingenuity to cure an animal. This internship showed me that this is what I want to do. My choice to become a zoo and wildlife vet was affirmed by this enlightening experience.

My career choice has evolved over the past seven years to reach zoo and wildlife medicine. I know that even within this specialty, there are a host of opportunities. I intend to focus on this field while being open to other possibilities. I could go into public health to keep our food supplies safe from foreign disease. Maybe I'll work with herders in a third world country to mitigate the cross contamination of viruses from cattle to wild ungulates. I could be on a Species Survival Plan or Taxon Advisory Group of an endangered species to manage their populations. Whatever my future holds, I know that I will be grateful for an education in veterinary medicine.