

My love and passion for caring for the environment and understanding more about urban wildlife have always been a part of my subconscious. The matriarchs in my family instilled in me the heart for my environment through gardening, feeding chickens, and caring for the land we sit upon. My experiences with my family at local parks gazing at feral cats chasing small birds, ducks being fed bread, and squirrels digging through the trash cans instilled my curiosity for understanding more about how animals coexist with humans in cities. The lack of representation that I saw in the scientists around me kept such interests in my subconscious; it was only during my time as an undergraduate that this passion developed consciously and that I realized I could study nature as a career.

Throughout my academic training, from my K-12 to undergraduate education, white men have dominated my STEM courses, both as students and as instructors. I did not encounter a women professor or Black scientist until my second and third year, respectively, at Florida State University (FSU). This showed me that my pursuit of this profession, despite being dominated by white men, was not off-limits and the exacerbated imposter syndrome I was experiencing as a minority could be overcome. For these reasons, I believe representation is crucial for children, especially those in Black, Indigenous, and of color communities, to recognize their full potential and for increasing the participation (and retention) of these individuals in STEM. In my future career as a research scientist, I hope to be a resource and role model for disadvantaged groups that lack exposure to science and access to opportunities in STEM fields. I endeavor to create initiatives that provide students from historically excluded backgrounds with the tools to fully engage with academic spaces and develop a sense of identity in their future career. My drive to address social and environmental inequity under a conservation and urban ecology lens has motivated me to pursue a Ph.D. in Environmental Science, Policy, and Management (ESPM) at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB).

As an Afro-Latino first-generation graduate from a low-income background, the focal point of my career combines my interdisciplinary interests in science with my passion for advocating for equity and justice by amplifying marginalized voices. I am determined to produce visible and accessible work to young Black and Brown students while representing the field in ways I never experienced. To do this, I have intentionally sought out research positions that provided me with the valuable experience necessary for graduate school and for becoming an independent researcher and supportive mentor. Supportive mentorships and collaboration were integral to my early research achievements and motivated me to address fundamental questions in ecology with novel approaches using various methods (e.g., spatial analytic tools). These experiences solidified my desire to become a cross-disciplinary researcher, science communicator, and educator who fosters inclusivity and representation of scientists from all backgrounds. My mission is to (1) build a support network (e.g., mentorship program) for the next generation of ecologists, particularly those from historically excluded groups; (2) invest in outreach programs for Black and Brown communities that are often neglected in education efforts; and (3) create equitably accessible programs that provide learning opportunities that are accessible to all, regardless of race or socio-economic background.

As an undergraduate at FSU, I began working towards my goal of becoming a mentor, educator, and science communicator by integrating environmental education and mentorship into the positions I held. I created green programs such as “SustainabiliTEA,” which gathered first-year undergraduates to discuss carbon footprints, recycling, and conservation goals. I also co-founded the FSU chapter of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) SEEDS (Strategies for Ecology Education, Diversity, and Sustainability) program, which focuses on increasing diversity within ecology. Through SEEDS, I organized educational opportunities including field trips, speakers, and panels based on the needs of our student body. I created a mentoring system within SEEDS that paired interested undergraduates with an ESA mentor to provide guidance and support with their endeavors in biology. As a mentor, I guided an undergraduate student with her research applications and connected her with a faculty member for research opportunities. During my time as President, SEEDS grew from four chair members to a student body of twenty-five, with eighteen coming from underrepresented backgrounds, and we connected four students with research opportunities.

Since graduating from FSU, I have continued to participate in panels and initiatives to educate undergraduates about career paths in ecology and the value of early research experiences. Recently, I have been working to advocate for safer and more inclusive conferences. In a first-author manuscript that is

currently in review in *Bulletin of Ecological Society of America*, we propose that virtual conferences present an opportunity for inclusion. We argue that virtual conferences can be safe spaces for disenfranchised voices, including the potential inclusivity of virtual conferences, the importance of virtual conferences for underrepresented students, and how virtual spaces can take more robust steps towards inclusion. Ecology and other scientific fields constantly lose bright minds and potential mentors because of the prohibitive cost of participating in research opportunities and conferences. In initiatives like this manuscript, I aim to move the field toward being as inclusive as possible. Further, I have joined the *Life in the City: Evolution in an Urbanizing World* blog as a contributor where I translate complex research papers in urban evolution into digestible concepts for a lay audience.

At UCB, I will work closely with the local SEEDS chapter to participate in building community among undergraduate and graduate students in ESPM and work toward undergraduate engagement in ecological research. Not only that, but I aim to pair graduate students (via ESPM and Integrative Biology) with high school students from a historically excluded background as a means to remove early educational barriers and motivate students in ecology, environmental science, and natural resources. These mentorship programs will be rooted in integrating these students, rather than assimilating, into STEM and diminishing the racial inequities in STEM achievement. These initiatives will be key in “leveling” the playing ground and a push towards creating equitable opportunities for education and ecological research experiences aimed at bridging the representation gap within the STEM community. As a graduate student at UCB, I aim to use the teaching skills I will acquire as a teaching assistant to work alongside local educators (e.g., BEETLES) to develop fundamental and effective teaching materials for K-12 public schools whose STEM education is often poorly funded. My vision is to provide interdisciplinary assignments that encompass interconnectivity between “different” subjects (e.g., civics, math, science) using real data and real animals.

I aspire to become a professor who actively conducts science education outreach and whose research produces actionable science that influences conservation policies and advances our knowledge of urban ecology. Additionally, I hope to create and manage outdoor education programs for K-12 students that allow them to interact with wildlife and learn about potential careers in ecology and natural resource management. More importantly, I seek to put justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront of my work. While pursuing my career goals, I will actively work towards increasing inclusion and retention through networking, outreach, and research to advance the ecological field.

My captivation with urban ecology and desire to unravel the eco-evolutionary processes in these spaces have led me to the Environmental Science, Policy, and Management department at the University of California, Berkeley. I am certain that UCB is the ideal institution for me because of the incredible faculty and commitment to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. As an individual from a historically excluded background, I have experienced the barriers students of color typically encounter within academia and recognize the need to be proactive in order to increase representation. As a graduate student, I hope to work closely with the Biology and McNair Scholars Program and invest in the next generation of scientists who come from historically disenfranchised backgrounds in academia. Further, outside collaborations (e.g., California Academy of Sciences) provide me with a network of nonprofits to conduct impactful work for unique communities. I am inspired by the existing efforts within ESPM by the Graduate Diversity Council (GDC) and faculty to address system racism and anti-Blackness within academia. Particularly, I am proud to see a publicized dialogue between both parties about working towards an academic space that is safe for all and I would be ecstatic to join these efforts. As a graduate student in the department working in the Schell Lab, I will contribute to interdisciplinary research as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives by working to create programs to further engage with residents in urban regions where my research will occur. UCB will allow me to achieve my goals of executing integrative and transformative research while intertwining my work with environmental justice by allowing me to work with, but not limited to, Drs. Rachel Morello-Frosch and Michael Mascarenhas. Working close to these faculty members who research environmental justice and the uneven distribution of pollutants will be crucial in developing my dissertation examining the effects of this distribution on wildlife. I am eager to learn from experts who focus on civil rights, environmental health, and the normalization of societal and health inequities in order to create transdisciplinary approaches for urban conservation. Thank you for your consideration.