

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Cesar Estien, Finland, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology

When my single mother moved our family to Florida, she wanted the best for us. With one look at my name and one word of her broken English, the administration placed me in a slower-paced educational program. After one year at this school, my mother pulled me out and vowed to find me the best education she could. Unfortunately, the best education around was a private school that a single mom with three kids could not afford. Determined, she applied for scholarship after scholarship to fund my education. As I grew older, I realized that being educated in a privatized system that doesn't provide minorities with the proper representation can stunt the professional growth of minorities. I never saw others that looked like me teaching or pursuing many professions, and I rarely saw other minorities in my school. I was subconsciously taught that I wouldn't belong in certain fields of study.

When I started university, I entered as an engineering major in hopes to make money and become a successful first-generation student. A year later, I realized I wasn't passionate about anything quite like I was about ecology. I decided to cultivate the love of the environment that I began to foster in high school and turn it into my career. Despite the lack of representation and the pressure on a first-generation student to enter a fiscally stable field, I decided to pursue a Masters in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. Conducting research at the University of Helsinki will provide me with the best foundation to accomplish this goal. My undergraduate education has prepared me for pursuing this topic of research. I have completed course work in Animal Behavior, Ecology, and Biogeography, providing me with a strong foundation for this research project and pursuing my Master's after. Beyond my course work, I have also volunteered for a Ph.D. student at Florida State University studying brown-headed nuthatches (*Sitta pusilla*), a cooperatively breeding bird. I analyzed videos on parental care and fledging behavior obtained from the field. For this position, I had to remain focused to detect the behavior of fast-moving birds. To ensure I was correctly identifying individuals, I navigated a complex access database composed of previously entered data to confirm my observations.

During the summer of 2019, I pursued my interest in behavioral ecology and worked as a field technician for the Kluane Red Squirrel Project in the Yukon Territory of Canada. As a core team member for this project, I worked in harsh conditions and handled red squirrels, recognized uniquely marked individuals, extensively tracked them using radio telemetry, and conducted detailed behavioral observations. During my time there, my desire to be a Fulbright scholar was solidified as I realized that I could become the representation I never saw as a child. Living as a Fulbright scholar in Finland will allow me to connect with young adults, providing me with the opportunity to not only learn about their experiences but to share my experiences with them.

After completing research with Fulbright, I plan to pursue my Master's in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and become a part of a long-term research project. I am interested in the interactions between urban ecology and behavioral ecology and the role climate change plays in this relationship, specifically with avian species. I want to further examine the anthropogenic effects on the habitat of the study species and use that information to further what we know about how the species will react to its dynamic environment. This information would be valuable to predict its behavior and other changes it could cause in the future on the ecosystem it belongs to. Through the research I conduct, I plan to help bridge the racial gap between science education, specifically in environmental science and ecology, and the Hispanic/African-American community by showing that a career in environmental science and ecology is possible for anyone with passion and a commitment to education.