

Student Reflection

Lance Gloss

Lance Gloss came to New England from Colorado in 2014 to pursue an urban studies degree at Brown University. He spent the summer interning for the International Land Conservation Network in Cambridge, MA.



“Everyone is influenced by everybody but you bring it down home the way you feel it.”

– Thelonious Monk

I had the good fortune to spend this summer as a research intern with the International Land Conservation Network (ILCN). This work exposed me to a host of brilliant thinkers dealing with all dimensions of land use policy—the team of conservationists, property tax experts, and community planners that make up the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, where the ILCN is housed. It was a lucky fit, as the ideas on discussion at Lincoln covered the spectrum of my professional interests, and brought these dimensions into a lively exchange.

If for that reason alone, the experience was life-changing. It has given me perspective on the work that led up to this point, shedding light on my undergraduate coursework in urban studies, my research at the Brown University Herbarium, my time working on trails and on farms and in greenhouses as a teen, and my experiences with international study and travel. Such reflections came naturally, but they were spurred to new vigor by the ALPINE Summer Institute. Alongside a gifted group of New England conservationists, I was pushed to continually reconsider my intent.

+++

When I drop my workbag by my bedside I do not slough my sense of purpose. I do, though, miss the enclosure of a job’s arms—the comfort of a distinct mission. During down time, aspirations burst from the tunnel onto a wide plain that is at once lonely and gorgeous.

What is that all about?

+++

I found the passion with which my summer co-workers approach their work infectious. I found myself excited to explain how land trusts work to everybody and their mother, or else inadvertently spending my Sundays cooking up questions to bring into work on Monday. Ideas at Lincoln are everywhere, and they are big. The staff regularly work on issues at the hemisphere scale. At the ILCN, ‘perpetuity’ is the standard timeframe for a successful project.

My own project had me studying the land laws, ecologies, and economic development patterns of a dozen countries across the globe. I was asked to make connections between these factors that would open up new opportunities for private involvement in land conservation, and to suggest conduits for the transfer of best practice across contexts. This kind of thinking is, to my mind, a lot like juggling. One must keep all of the pertinent concepts afloat and active, cycling through them to produce innovative combinations. Operating at such a conceptual altitude plays to my strengths, and replicates much that I love about the academy, where I've spent so much of my time. Few would contest that, on the spectrum from thinking to doing, the work at Lincoln is on the thinking end.

+++

O, the irony, when I closed my eyes after a day in office and saw the hot sun and soil and sweaty crew of labor days past! Desire swelled!

+++

Funnily enough, what drove me to pursue a university degree three and half years ago was the sense that hands-on jobs in landscaping and conservation—jobs I loved—lacked the intellectual engagement for which a part of me longed. University sure gave me that intellectual engagement, and my project this summer was arguably the most cognitively-stimulating so far. Yet, there is certainly something frustrating about researching for weeks on end with only concepts and pages to show for it—however impactful or beautiful they may be.

I started to think that that thinking about problems wouldn't bring me the satisfaction I needed from work, unless I had the chance to bring that knowledge to bear.

As I carried on reading and thinking through the land laws of Liberia, Malaysia, Argentina, South Africa (a form of travel), I also observed my own thoughts. I was looking for something true about me that could serve as a guide as I embark on my career, degree in hand. What thoughts were bubbling in the background of my research and conversations? What did I want?

Turns out, whatever I'm doing, I'm thinking about the places involved. Places are finite (an address on a map) or abstract (the sensation of belonging) or immense (our big beautiful biotic orb). For me, passion sits in place. That same passion motivates almost everyone that works in this multi-faceted field of land-use—from gardener to architect to environmental lawyer. What makes the ILCN a special place to work is that everyone *cares*. A love for land is what brought them into the field. For many, this love is what keeps them around.



People who care about what they do invest passion in what they produce. The folks that make up the Lincoln Institute may work with concepts, but they do so that others can discover the beauty of a pulsating neighborhood, a smooth train trip, or a glen resounding with bird calls. Whatever their day to day task, each of them is engaged in stewardship.

+++

More than thinking or acting, it is feeling that makes work worth doing. Work should provoke passion. No—work should elicit intimacy.

+++

Intimacy is not specific to either thinking or doing. A person can feel whole love for a place, a people, an object, an idea, a dream, or a data point. Intimacy derives from a combination of commitment, desire, and respect.

I walk away from the summer with new knowledge of self: if loving land comes easy to me, and one must love his or her work, then I would do well to keep working with land. I will find a place where I can employ conceptual abilities *and* my capacity to apply and share knowledge, in a way that cultivates my relationships with places and people. Whatever form that takes, let it be something like this summer's internship: worth the effort, and of worth to the world.