

Restructuring natural resource majors

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A troublesome trend is occurring at colleges and universities around the country: fewer students are graduating with degrees in natural resource related degree programs. As a result, the number of qualified professionals to manage fish and wildlife programs is dwindling. What is even more troubling is that nationally, the percentage of students enrolling in the major has increased. For reasons unknown, students have been leaving the natural resource degree path after enrollment to pursue other degrees. Finding cause for the steady decline in student interest was the focus of a Michigan State University study, published in the January 2011 issue of the *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education*.

After interviewing students that had been enrolled in a fish and wildlife degree program, but had left to pursue another major at Michigan State, researchers identified seven categories for student departure. All the interviews were conducted in the same manner, using the same questions.

Engagement and employment were two themes identified by researchers. Previous research indicates students dislike lecture-based learning classes and prefer a more active learning environment. However, fish and wildlife students felt they had little to no access hands on experiences or field work. At the same time, many of the students believed that finding a job after graduation would be difficult, unless they received a masters or Ph.D.

Academic rigor and awareness of the major were also included in the

seven categories. Students who left admitted they were not expecting face paced, advanced math and science pre-requisite courses, nor did they understand the relevancy of such courses. Even students that were academically competitive in high school found these courses to be a challenging task. Many students had not even heard of the major until visiting campus or while enrolling in classes. Others simply equated it to be being like a biologist on television, walking through nature and easily finding animals to study.

Although programmatic quality and experience as well as motivation ranked high on importance with students that left the major, almost none of the students being interviewed had any negative comments about the actual fish and wildlife courses. In fact, many were impressed with the close relationships formed with the professor and the students due to the majors smaller class sizes. While some students cited a past connection with the wilderness or experience in outdoor recreation as motivation for picking the major, leaving the major had not changed their views of the natural world.

"Understanding what motivates students to pursue natural resources careers has far reaching implications for both university programs and management and any attempt to address these issues is a step in the right direction regarding student retention. However, failure to address these issues will likely perpetuate the dwindling enrollments of natural resources programs," says Bjørn Wolter, one of the authors of the study.

Wolter hopes the study will motivate schools across the country to develop strategies aimed at increasing enrollment in [natural resource](#) related majors.

Provided by American Society of Agronomy

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