



# RESEARCH INTERNSHIP

## MEMPHIS ZOO RESEARCH INTERNSHIP HIGHLIGHT

Did you know the Memphis Zoo offers many different internship opportunities across the zoo? From zookeeper internships to marketing internships, we have lots of ways students can receive hands on learning experience! We asked three of our research interns to provide feedback from their experience to share their advice to other students. They spent their summer in the field studying amphibians with Dr. Sheila Poo, one of our research scientists at the zoo.

## STUDENT PROFILES

### **Tyler T. – Memphis Zoo Research Department Intern**

Tyler is currently a senior at Central Michigan University working on a double major in Environmental studies and Philosophy. Ty is originally from the southern region and is an outstanding student with a particular interest in amphibian and reptiles.

### **Tyler P. – Doris Duke Conservation Scholarship Program Intern**

Tyler P is currently senior at University of Massachusetts Amherst majoring in Natural Resource Conservation. Tyler has a particular interest in aquatic systems and recognizes the importance of environmental stewardship, particularly in the light of inequalities between different communities.

### **Erin – St. Mary’s Episcopal School Honors Independent Research Study student**

Erin is currently a senior in high school in the Memphis area. Erin’s summer internship at the Zoo is part of her senior year Honors Independent Research Study (HIRS) project, which pairs Memphis students with local organizations for summer internships.

### **Why did you want to come work with researchers at the Memphis Zoo?**

**Tyler P:** My initial motivation to join the research team was to make a tangible difference in the field of conservation and learn new techniques from real professionals. In today's climate of animal welfare activists, zoos are seen as controversial institutions. By working with researchers at the Memphis zoo I was able to explore first hand and form my own opinion on what it really means to participate in environmental stewardship. I saw how much effort the research teams put into educating, promoting, and studying animal wellness. An experience I doubt I would have gained from looking at zoos with an outside perspective.

**Erin:** I've always been interested in biology and conservation, and I signed up for an independent research class at my school specifically to try and work in the field for the summer. I looked into the current research being done at the zoo, and it sounded exactly like what I was looking for. I wanted to get firsthand experience in a lab, specifically one focused on conservation, before heading to college and pursuing that interest.

**Tyler T:** I aspire to one day be a researcher in zoology and ecology, and I specifically have an interest in working closely with zoos and aquariums. I knew that getting to work in such a setting as the research labs at the Memphis Zoo would help enable me to see first-hand what that was like, as well as gain valuable experience. More specifically, my research interests, goals, experience, and the things I was looking for in a mentor overlapped extremely well with Dr. Sheila Poo.

### **Did you know about Zoo research before working with Dr. Poo?**

**Tyler P:** I had heard about the conservation work that goes on in zoos before working with Dr. Poo but from a limited scope. I had assumed that zoos worked to assist recovering populations of endangered species, but never knew exactly what went into accomplishing that. There is a lot more cross-disciplinary knowledge, resource acquisition, and specialties involved in creating meaningful conservation efforts than I had expected.

**Erin:** Yes, I knew that a lot of zoos have invested in conservation/research programs, but of course working with Dr. Poo taught me a lot about the actual process and the work being done. I loved being able to see how everything works behind the scenes.

**Tyler T:** Yes, I was aware that zoos were (and are) becoming increasingly conservation- and research-oriented and that there are researchers who do amazing work at zoos and aquariums. However, my time at the Memphis Zoo and experiences in the Amphibian Lab gave me incredible insight into precisely what that work entails on a multitude of scales. Working with Ally and Sheila greatly broadened my understanding of the plethora of possibilities in zoo research.

### **What did you enjoy most about the experience?**

**Tyler P:** I enjoyed working as a contributor to Dr. Poo's research team the most. Being able to collaborate with others in the lab and in the field was an experience I'll never forget. Dr. Poo and Allison were able to teach me so much about amphibian life history, habitat selection, etc. Hearing how the other interns developed their research interests and motivations was inspiring as well. Whenever we would all work together to clean out tanks, or inject PIT tags in the toads it felt like we were all working towards this common goal of seeing animals prosper. It was a bonding moment as much as it was a chance to grow my career.

**Erin:** The field work was my favorite- being able to spend the day out in nature while also getting firsthand experience with a research project was pretty awesome.

**Tyler T:** Practically, or in terms of the work itself, I think I most enjoyed being in the field. I always feel like I am the best version of myself when I am in nature, and getting to aid in doing research with direct conservation applications always amplifies those feelings and experiences. However, I would also say that I really enjoyed getting to be a part of such a close-knit lab group, which is also the best version of science - getting to collaborate with a diverse group of people oriented towards your same goals and who enable collective achievement in addition to personal growth.

### **What do you think you took away from the experience?**

**Tyler P:** I learned how to be a better scientist and naturalist. I found out what it means to work as part of a research team and how each person plays a critical role in making conservation possible within zoos. I have a greater appreciation for the work that zoos do to preserve animal diversity, and will carry this insight into my future career. I hope to inspire others to take the initiative on learning about all the good zoos do, rather than simply point out the negatives.

**Erin:** Before this experience, I'd never actually worked with researchers or in a lab, and it was cool to see how everything works and flows. I also loved being able to work with the zoo, as it's a place I've been coming to for years and seeing how everything works behind the scenes was awesome.

**Tyler T:** Again, I can divide this response into a practical (work specific) and a personal/holistic answer. Practically, I think I improved a lot in terms of my lab-based research skills. Coming into the internship, I would certainly say, relative to my field research skills, my lab skills were definite weaknesses for me; however, under Dr. Poo's tutelage, I think I improved greatly over the course of the summer and gained a lot of confidence. Holistically, I think that this experience simply reaffirmed my conviction that this is the right path for me - one which I am suited to and can make a difference in.

### **What advice would you give to a student seeking an internship at the zoo?**

**Tyler P:** I would tell an incoming student to keep an open-mind when working at the zoo internship. There may be tasks you might not have thought you had to do, or you may not be working with the species you initially set out to study. There are real great learning opportunities you can seize if you put your best foot forward. Don't be afraid to talk to the other researchers about your career interests and goals. Some of them are doing what you might want to do in the future. Ask them about the steps they took to get where they are. They are there to help you succeed. If you always remain a student of conservation, I promise you'll find yourself with more knowledge than you came in with by the end of your time at the zoo.

**Tyler T:** In terms of the application process itself, be proactive, make sure to follow application instructions precisely, and make clear how important the internship is to you and how it can help you, personally, professionally, and otherwise. Conversely, familiarize yourself with the work of the lab to which you are applying and be clear about how you - with your experiences - are well-suited to help achieve the goals of the research. Beyond that, for the internship itself, be patient, and don't be afraid of new experiences - and failing. At the edge of discomfort is where growth lies. So, prepare as best you can, be confident, and do your best, but don't shy away from failure or discomfort. It is largely because of these things that I feel I grew as much as I did over the summer and took so much from the internship.



Are you interested in learning more about the internships offered at the zoo? Go online at [memphiszoo.org/careers](https://memphiszoo.org/careers) or call the zoo to inquire about available internship opportunities!