

Meet Sarah Gaudreault at Riverside Conservancy

Canadian Sarah Gaudreault came to Riverside Conservancy as a student intern through the Stetson Scholar Program and served as the 2021 summer program manager in the Edgewater headquarters office. She returned to Riverside Conservancy in autumn 2021 as a student intern and completed her senior research project to graduate from Stetson University in spring 2022.

Sarah worked to facilitate Riverside Conservancy's living shoreline projects. She has tested water quality on a weekly basis and monitored the salinity of the lagoon. She has also tended to the center's shoreline plants, created a pollinator garden and managed Riverside Conservancy's restoration program, overseeing visiting students on site. She also helped lead the Riverside Young Leaders in Conservation Program for high school students.

Sarah was hired by Riverside Conservancy in May 2022 as program manager.

Here's what Sarah has to say about her experience at Riverside Conservancy:

Why did you come to Riverside Conservancy?

I was a marine biology major at Stetson, so when I looked into it, it was relevant to my field, and because Riverside Conservancy is small, I thought it would be a good place for me to start. I will be able to see the effect we have in real time – from the beginning steps to something much bigger when we can scale it later.

Were you the only college student here?

I first came here as an intern with two other Stetson students after we learned there was an opportunity to come volunteer. We started coming here in spring 2021. I had never heard of this place.

What did you want to gain from this experience?

The goal was to restore the native shoreline at Riverside Conservancy. We did a land assessment and identified all of the plants already growing on the property so they could be included in the ecological assessment for the conservation easement. We learned there were more than 40 different species of plants growing on this property. I'm collecting seeds now and we hope to have a native plant giveaway in the future.

Did you use a tool to help you identify plants?

I was using iNaturalist, which is a National Geographic app.

What do you do with the nursery of shoreline plants at Riverside Conservancy?

We potted black mangrove propagules, so now we have black mangrove trees growing. We also planted red mangrove propagules and now we're growing red mangrove trees. Our hope is that we can get local residents to remove their seawalls and plant mangrove trees to create a living shoreline.

What other plants are in Riverside Conservancy's nursery?

We have 500 Fakahatchee grass plants, which are the really tall grasses with broad leaves and serrated edges, and we have 500 *Spartina patens* and 500 *Spartina Alterniflora* plants. We're also growing blanket flower, seaside goldenrod, swamp milkweed, butterfly weed, gopher apple, coral bean and two tropical milkweeds.

How are you harvesting seeds?

The plants that we planted at Veteran's Park in Edgewater over the last two years have gone to seed, so we're harvesting seeds from those native plants. The idea is that from every planting we have, we then harvest the seeds.

What is appealing about this hands-on way to learn vs. sitting in a classroom?

Sitting in the classroom gives you the foundation you need, but sometimes it's hard to visualize exactly how you're going to use something. You might not be able to apply everything you learn in a classroom, but coming out here, you can see what has to be done in an area. It's accessible learning. Sometimes these types of internship opportunities are located far away or are very expensive, but coming here gives students a chance to learn things they wouldn't have been able to otherwise learn in class.

Have you learned something here that you really appreciate?

I had no idea about the living shoreline concept at all. I never learned about it in school and I never considered the detrimental things that a seawall could do to the environment. We have learned about the effects of things like that here. The things I've learned in class, I can also apply here. When we did the plant assessments for the conservation easement, I had a flora and fauna class at Stetson and part of our assignment was to go around and identify native plants. It's really been a combination of both being here and studying things in class that have made this a good experience.