

Anthropology Student Develops Uplands Social Science Project

Work-study program plunges Cal State L.A. students into COAST research



CSULA student Anna Benavides participating in the annual Great L.A. River Clean-Up this past spring.

Growing up in Los Angeles, **Anna Benavides'** parents would take her to Santa Monica State Beach once or twice a year. Oblivious to the trash on the sand or washed up on shore, Benavides always looked forward to having fun splashing in the water, playing with the sand, and basking in the sun when she was a little girl.

"As an adult, I realize all communities in the uplands or inner cities have an impact on the ocean," explained Benavides, an anthropology graduate student at Cal State L.A. who wants to make a difference in helping to protect the oceans, streams and rivers.

Additionally, Benavides remembers that most kids in her working-class neighborhood didn't get to go to the beach, even during the summer. Their lack of interaction with the ocean attracted Benavides to the study of how local communities are represented or not represented by various different non-government organizations and local political organizations in drafting environmental policies. Now, her M.A. ethnographic research investigates how activist groups get local communities involved in changes that directly alter their uplands and ocean environments.

"I am specifically interested in how racism, gender discrimination, and class discrimination affect the role of local communities in environmental development," she said.

On campus, she has served as secretary of the newly-formed Association of Environmental and Social Justice Advocate. She has also volunteered at the annual Great L.A. River Clean-Up this past spring.

Most recently, Benavides completed a 10-month stint with the California State University (CSU) Council on Ocean Affairs, Science and Technology (COAST) work-study program. The COAST program aims to increase the number of federally funded work-study students participating in coastal and marine research.

The COAST program, established in 2008, also integrates system-wide resources and promotes interdisciplinary multi-campus collaborations to advance the knowledge of California's natural coastal and marine resources and the processes that affect them.

Under the COAST work-study program, Benavides worked with CSULA Professor Kathleen Sullivan to learn advanced qualitative ethnographic research methods for researching the political and social justice aspects of natural resource development. They re-assembled a set of documents into a meaningful timeframe, requiring much backtracking through the original archive.

"I was able to help Dr. Sullivan assemble part of her database on Marine Protected Areas in California," said Benavides, who still delights in visiting local beaches. "Her research indicates that politics in the uplands' river basins are as important to ocean resources as the politics in the marine environment."

Benavides enjoyed the experience of working closely with a faculty member, while conducting environmental policy and social justice research. "The close mentor relationship helped me build on my ideas, and taught me that intensive research is rigorously systematic and requires specific types of methods to organize vast quantities of data," said Benavides. "Acquiring this important methods skill will help me better organize data for my own research project."

As a result of COAST, Benavides also has formulated her own uplands social science research project modeled after Sullivan's marine politics research. This summer, she began analyzing the Los Angeles River through a sociological interpretative framework.

"My experiences at CSULA, along with the work-study program, have given me the unique opportunity to learn and grow as an intellectual as I pursue my interest in understanding the different mechanisms that shape environmental policies, and the way in which individuals that live in underrepresented communities are included or excluded from the process," said Benavides.

<http://www.calstatela.edu/univ/ppa/spotlight/archive/2013/COAST-2013.php>