

Engaging the Outdoors with Samuel Cervantes

Meet Samuel Cervantes, a second year MESM Student at Bren who brings perspective to environmental science initiatives through the lens of accessibility.

Written by Ella McKhann

A big blow-up screen sits in a clearing, framed by rich green branches and sharp-edged boulders. Wall-E plays on the screen. People relax on blankets and lawn chairs under the navy glow of the fading sky. Tables filled with activities and food line the edges of the pavilion. Community members smile and laugh as they mingle. There's a sense of tranquility in the cooling air, a feeling only invoked in the presence of wild spaces. Wind rustles the leaves. Distance muffles the roar of cars.

This is a movie night at the Audubon Society at Debs Park in Los Angeles. Held outside of normal park hours, movie nights are designed to engage community members with nature who may not be able to attend during the work day. Samuel Cervantes, a second year Master's student at the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management, helped put on these events when he interned at Debs Park during an undergraduate summer fellowship. This initiative hit close to home for him: not just emotionally, but physically as well.

Samuel's first relationships to nature were nurtured in a garden not too far from this scene. Raised in Watts, LA, Samuel grew up boxed in by pavement. Nature was not accessible among the high-rise buildings with their shiny windows and the asphalt streets worn grey by walkers. Travel to parks was often out of the picture. "I don't think most people realize," Samuel said, "if you live in Watts or high dense areas like that, it's really hard to make time to go out in nature."

It wasn't until Samuel joined his high school's garden club that he formed his first connections with the natural world. A local woman owned an overgrown lot next to the school.

The garden club members proposed a deal: they would pull pesky weeds and maintain the gnarled grounds in exchange for a garden bed on the property. The woman accepted.

Every Monday morning through all four years of high school, Samuel and his fellow gardeners would go to their garden bed and water their plants, bonds between them growing like new roots into earth. “It was a really cool experience, especially the community aspect of it,” Samuel reflects, “growing something really beautiful out of an ugly place.” It was his first real experience engaging with the environment. Samuel was hooked.

Samuel went on to take AP Environmental Science, taught by the advisor of the garden club. His familiarity with the teacher and curiosity for the subject matter drew him in, and Samuel found himself interested in pursuing the subject further. This interest brought him to the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he studied environmental science as an undergraduate. During his time in undergrad, Samuel participated in a fellowship through Bren, where he had the opportunity to engage in professional development and hands-on mentorship.

At the encouragement of his mentor, Samuel applied to the Bren School, and transitioned into a Masters of Environmental Science and Management. Now in his second year, Samuel specializes in Coastal Resource Management and Water Resource Management. He loves the problem-solving aspects of environmental science, with the many different paths one can take to get a workable answer. “There could be one issue, but like, 10 different solutions, you just had to be creative and figure out a way.”

Little moments have always held the biggest impact for Samuel. While working at the Audubon Society at Debs Park, one of Samuel’s favorite aspects was welcoming strangers who meandered in the public park unaware. Inviting hikers and walkers in with a friendly smile, he guided them to discover the vibrant life winding along trails right in their own backyards. If they left their phone or ID, visitors could rent out binoculars or a bird map, identifying the colorful calls and flamboyant feathers they spotted.

Samuel witnessed explorers come back with renewed passion for the beauty of their home. It was moments like these that filled Samuel with the most hope: “just little moments like

that, just seeing someone excited about nature and actually thinking about it and wanting to connect,” he said.

It’s this easy accessibility that Samuel believes is most important to conservation efforts. Growing up in a low-income Latino community, Samuel understands firsthand the barriers to nature that exist in those spaces. “I’m trying to make things more accessible for communities,” he says. “I want to engage my own community.”

Especially in coastal resource management, there are few diverse voices speaking out. As a Latino, Samuel believes context is one of the most powerful perspectives he brings to the table. “I have a lot more context of how these communities are made up and their relationship with the environment,” he explains. By working with those blind to their privilege and merging those voices with more aware views, Samuel believes real change can occur. Like the free movie nights at Debs Park: something as simple as having activities outside of working hours makes the park accessible for people who can’t afford to take time off work to visit.

Cultural events are another beautiful way to foster engagement across demographics. Samuel was part of a *Pachanga de las Americas* event that the Audubon Society put on, celebrating the history of people and nature as inevitably intertwined. He believes cultural celebrations such as this are huge for community engagement and sense of belonging in outdoor spaces.

This engagement is also aided by seemingly simple strategies such as translations. As a native Spanish speaker, Samuel was instrumental in the implementation of bilingual outreach materials.

Both of these initiatives are huge for engaging diverse voices with education and inclusion in environmental science. “It makes a major difference, and it really helps them feel included, and they tend to engage with the space a lot more after that,” he says, speaking to the *Pachanga de las Americas* event.

Beyond the Audubon Society, Samuel also worked for the Nature Conservancy on their FishKit team where he analyzed fishery health on a more global level. Working directly with

local fishing communities, Samuel thought it was a really cool experience to engage with those who spoke other languages or came from less traditionally-educated backgrounds.

In the world of coastal resource management where the teams working on issues are less diverse, Samuel wants to bring in more viewpoints. “Especially in the coastal resource realm, I feel like that's even a bigger issue, is the lack of diversity in it,” he says. “So I think that's something I'd want to improve on.” This is why he chose to specialize in Water Resource Management as well as coastal at Bren, a field he has found to be a bit more heterogeneous. At Santa Barbara, he can develop expertise in both.

Samuel loves the freedom he feels in Santa Barbara. He shows immense gratitude for his time at Bren and the ways his journey has unfolded, from that little garden plot in the streets of LA to his time at UCSB. “I feel like in other communities, they have like nature programs or stuff like that, that just never existed growing up. So I just didn't know that was a path or just something that people did,” Samuel explains. But it is a path he found himself on.

Samuel shows that long drives to sweeping vistas or flashy trips to national parks aren't the only ways to foster connections to nature. For him, it was a simple garden plot in a city lot that incited a lifelong love of environmental science. Samuel's life experiences have positioned him to be able to give back to communities like the one he came from. And those impacts are sure to last.

*AI Disclosure: Otter AI was used in transcription of audio interview recording.