

My Experience as a Summer Student: Ecojustice, Toronto Office

Through the support of the International Human Rights Program and David Asper Centre for Constitutional Rights, I was able to garner life-changing experience while working as a summer student at Ecojustice.

Ecojustice does what is arguably Canada's most important work in environment law. Their principal areas of focus are the protection of wilderness and wildlife; fighting noxious energy projects and climate change; and safeguarding human health against things like toxic chemicals. Through litigation and law reform, they tackle Canada's most difficult environmental issues.

I have never met people whom I more aspire to emulate; nor have I ever witnessed such passion and dedication. Their work can be unrelentingly bleak and thankless. Yet, these lawyers' dauntless practice is defined by an unequivocal belief in what they are doing. That factor is something which is, I believe, extremely rare in the legal profession.

Ecojustice is Canada's only environmental law charity—their operations are 100% donor-funded. What this means is that these individuals put in the same extreme hours as other lawyers in private practice, and often wind up in the highest courts in the land, all without charging a single billable hour. Essentially, every day, the people working at Ecojustice reject the temptations presented by narrow, self-serving gains; meaning, of course, the enormous financial gains they could so easily achieve working elsewhere, as some of the most gifted lawyers in the country.

It is this commitment to the greater good of the environment, and the kind of people it attracts, which made my experience at Ecojustice and the education I received so unparalleled in its quality. The Ecojustice culture—informed by peoples' shared, deeply personal sense of investment—eschews many of the unfortunate stereotypes that pervade the legal community. I felt safe to learn, ask questions, make mistakes, and grow, both personally and professionally, in this environment. In fact, some mistakes I made at the outset may have been caused directly by how comfortable and “part of the team” I was made to feel, before my understanding of the requisite structure of the profession became more well-defined.

As my time at Ecojustice proceeded, and my learning reached a certain economy of scale, I began to understand the lawyers' formidable work and achievements in greater detail. This only increased my respect for their intellectual and ethical rigueur. I also realized that they had given me an enormous and intangible gift: at my young age, I already know what it feels like to love where I work, and to love what I do. It is now my greatest hope that I will one day be able to return.