Growing up in Roxbury, I spent much of my childhood in the forests, fields, and rivers of Steep Rock. I remember hiking the trails in the treacherous snow and ice of winter. I remember the landscape coming to life as winter melted into spring. I remember lazy summer days fishing in the Shepaug River, and how bright and crisp it would become as autumn rolled in. As a Boy Scout I would spend days working on community service projects, maintaining its walkways and foot bridges, and spend nights camping below the stars.

In September of 2018, I went away to college. I studied geography, and learned a bit about how humans interface with the world around us. Places are not just dots on a map, but they are human constructs. We base these constructs in part off of landscapes our senses experience and environments we spend time in. From these spatial constructs we build our own identities. Nature is inseparable from who we are. Studying at a university in the United Kingdom made me realize how true this is. Not a day went by that I did not think about our little corner of the Litchfield hills, with its rolling greenery, and lush colors. I did not realize how important this is to my identity until I missed it. So, as soon as I saw an ad in a local newspaper about the Steep Rock Van Sinderen Conservation Internship, I applied.

I worked with an industrious co-intern named Calvin. Our first day was filled with hard work- we moved and filled new wood sheds, hauled lumber, among other small projects with sustainability expert Mike Giapponi. As the days went by, there was never a dull moment. As our technical skills were broadened and our calluses hardened, Calvin and I became masters of pruning trails, experienced fence builders, and experts at finding and destroying invasive species. Driving the SRA’s UTV across the three preserves, de-barking cedar trees, and working on Hidden Valley’s switchbacks made the whole experience an adventure. It was fascinating and intense work keeping the trails and campsites accessible and sustainable.

Mixed in with our days of manual labor were days spent focused on the scientific side of conservation, working under the knowledgeable and helpful Rory Larson. On our second day, we continued the annual Northern Goshawk survey, collecting data across the Macricostas Preserve on the presence of the elusive raptor (or lack thereof). Later on, we worked on the conversion of a corn field into a pollinator meadow inhabited by native plants. On another occasion, we waded through tributaries of the Shepaug River, using an electric current to temporarily stun the fish so we could conduct a trout survey. The data from this survey, which was done in conjunction with the Housatonic Valley Authority and the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, will be used in deciding whether or not culverts in the road at Steep Rock should be replaced.

Calvin and I also spent quite a bit of time planning and completing a capstone project. The SRA gave us the independence to choose the project ourselves, and we made the decision to map invasive species across the three preserves. To do this, we hiked around the perimeter of key stands of plants such as Japanese knotweed, Japanese barberry, multiflora rose, and more, using a geographic information system called Arc. This created a digital map of the stands that included size and proximity to trails. Along with this, we included information on density and pictures of each stand. This will be useful in future conservation projects and the protection of native ecosystems.

Whether it was spent on maintenance, conservation, or our project, each hour we worked made Calvin and I gain a unique appreciation of the land and environment that are integral to our community’s identity. It takes effort and time to help them thrive and be accessible to the public. As we guided volunteers, Scouts, and senior citizens on the trails, it reinforced what I learned in the classroom about how nature informs place and identity. Steep Rock, Hidden Valley, and Macricostas are all imperative to the *idea* of where we live. They are cornerstones of our culture and community. I am both glad and humbled that I had the opportunity to become better acquainted with the land that I love, and found that it helped me to learn more about myself along the way.