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### **GWU Chemistry and Ecology Professors Inspired Alumnus to Study Wildlife Conservation**

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# GWU Chemistry and Ecology Professors Inspired Alumnus to Study Wildlife Conservation

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Office of University  
Communications

March 1, 2019

## *Michael Byron '14 Researches Cheetahs While Working on Master's Degree*



Two years before Michael Byron, of San Antonio, Texas, was recruited to the men's basketball program at Gardner-Webb University, he watched the GWU team defeat the Kentucky Wildcats, 84-68, in a televised game. The historic win was on his mind when he decided to visit the GWU campus. "I got along really well with the players and the coaches," Byron reflected. "I really enjoyed the campus and the atmosphere, so that's why I decided to attend."

Byron chose to major in biology, because he had found the subject interesting in high school. After his experiences in the GWU chemistry lab, he opted to double major in chemistry. He also discovered in classes with Dr. Cathleen Ciesielski, former associate professor of biology, and Dr. Joseph Oyugi, professor of ecology, that he was interested in conservation topics and advances in physiology and genetics.

“The classes and the faculty helped inspire me and led me down the path that I’m on today,” shared the 2014 GWU alumnus. “I loved physiology and the complexity of understanding how so many processes in the body work together to produce an effect. I also loved seeing the similarities and differences between different species, and seeing how these differences allowed each species to be the most suited for its environment. Dr. Oyugi was very passionate about the content, and I was intrigued by the interactions between organisms and their environment.”

Byron will finish his Master of Science in physiology in May from North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh, N.C., and plans to pursue his doctorate. When he started the master’s program, he felt prepared for graduate-level studies. “My classes at GWU, especially the upper level science classes, were small in comparison to the classes I’ve seen at NCSU,” he observed. “I feel like the GWU professors were teaching us the content directly, rather than just having us come to a lecture and learn out of a book. This was also especially helpful for classes with labs, as the professor was leading and directing us in lab, rather than a teacher assistant. I definitely think this aspect helped me with my future experiences doing lab work.”



As a graduate student, Byron has taught the laboratory sections for cellular and molecular biology at NCSU. “I definitely try to follow the example set by my professors at GWU,” he informed. “I find that showing excitement and passion for what is being taught can make the students more willing to engage in and learn the content. I also like to build relationships with my students, and help them to realize that I was in their shoes not too long ago.”

Through the NCSU program, he has also worked with Dr. Adrienne Crosier, lead researcher at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Front Royal, Va. The labs’ members seek to better understand the reproductive physiology of the cheetah and other wild felids. “Hopefully our research will tell us how and why some cheetahs have trouble reproducing in captivity,” he asserted. “This can help in the ultimate goal to create a sustainable captive cheetah population as insurance for the declining cheetah population in the wild.”

His goal is to continue working in the field of wildlife conservation. “I want to be involved in helping to apply groundbreaking scientific advances that would provide greater knowledge and understanding of the behaviors and physiological processes of endangered

species,” Byron affirmed.