Peter Smagacz - Interview questions for Global Studies BA Thesis feature

• How did you first become interested in your research project?

As long as I can remember, I have been enchanted by the ocean and its inhabitants, especially those found on coral reefs. The worlds that exist beneath the surface of oceans, lakes, seas, and rivers have always fascinated me. I have also grown up in a time when oceanic conservation has always been an issue. I remember having a computer game in grammar school that would teach about reef systems as well as offer mini-games where you would protect the reef in different ways by stopping poachers in Marine Protected Areas, preventing boats from dropping anchors on the reef, and managing invasive species. This interest in both coral and its conservation only grew when I became a certified scuba diver as well as a marine aquarist. Being able to connect with coral both in the wild and in my own home gave me an increased sense of respect and wonder for this form of being.

Upon entering the second quarter of *Contemporary Global Issues* within the International Studies major, we were asked to start thinking about research topics, and it felt only natural to focus on something I’ve come to know quite well that truly had global significance—coral. I wasn’t sure how exactly the project would work at that time (and still didn’t until pretty much the second quarter of the BA seminar fourth year), but I knew I wanted coral to be at the root of whatever project I undertook.

• How was your research related to or inspired by your other experiences at UChicago (classes you took, extracurricular activities, people you’ve met here, semester abroad, etc)?

The classes I took at UChicago were crucial in framing my research. I think part of the beauty of the International Studies program is that it allows you to tailor your courses to your research (or other) interests while also taking you a bit outside of your comfort zone. Even those unrelated to the project’s final goals were extremely helpful in thinking through the work.

Throughout my time within the International Studies major, Professor Larisa Jasarevic was an incredible source of inspiration for this project. From her lectures in *Contemporary Global Issues* to smaller group work in *About Nature* and *Earthbound Metaphysics* (as well as lots of office hours), she really helped me build the framework to be able to speak about coral in the way that I did. I also received incredible support and guidance from my BA preceptor, Erin Glade, throughout the BA seminar. Without these two, this project would not have been possible.

I also need to mention the immense support I received from my roommates who listened to me think out loud/complain throughout the entire process. From first year dorms to final drafts of BAs we’ve been together, and I could not have picked a better random group for UChicago Housing to pair me with.
• What was the most surprising/fun/exciting aspect of doing the research?

For me, the most surprising part was finding like-minded individuals within the academic community. Bron Taylor’s book *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* was a HUGE “aha moment” for me. Finding sources who gave academic merit to animists, shamans, and other environmentalists was one of the most rewarding parts of this whole project. Each link also unlocked new doors into branches of academia I didn’t know existed, and even if unrelated piqued my interest as well. The whole rabbit hole of research was both overwhelming and incredibly exciting.

• What did you find challenging about doing this research?

At first, everything seemed like relevant information, and I thought my project was going to have to talk about all of it. Having to narrow down my sources, even ones that were directly related, was very challenging. In the beginning, the BA seemed like a lot wider of a project than it ended up being, and choosing one(ish) direction to take the project in was a difficult choice. Looking back, I still wish I could have included more, but I know it would have taken time or space away from other sections that really needed to be there.

• Do you have any plans for taking this research further?

I would love to. Right now, I feel like I need a bit of a break from academia, but I fully intend on returning in the near future. This project has definitely sparked a love for multi-species anthropology within me that I really want to pursue in graduate school. The more I learn about coral (and other non-humans in the Earth family), the more I am intrigued by them. Especially given the current state of environmental affairs, I feel the more attention is given to all beings on this Earth, the better our collective future will be on this planet.