

## Three students recognized as Outstanding ESSM Graduate Students of the Year

The department recognized master's student Michele Clark and doctoral students Matt Berg and Carissa Wonkka as the 2013-2014 Outstanding ESSM Graduate Students for their exceptional academic performance and contributions to their field and to the department.

Michele Clark is completing a master's degree under the guidance of Dr. Bill Rogers and Dr. Urs Kreuter. Michele came in to ESSM as a TAMU Graduate Diversity Fellowship holder. During the course of her program, she also received two Welder Wildlife Foundation research grants and a Welder Wildlife Foundation Graduate Fellowship.

After assisting Dr. Rogers' research team in South Africa in summer 2012, Michele developed a related rangeland sustainability study in south Texas. It is the proposal for this research that secured her the support from the Welder Wildlife Foundation. Michele is investigating complex ecological systems in Texas rangelands through rigorous experimental manipulation of fire seasonality and livestock grazing. This work will provide an ecological baseline for managers to develop sound restoration plans for increased rangeland functionality and resilience.

In addition to conducting innovative comparative research supported with funding she obtained herself, Michele has maintained a strong academic record, served as a top-rated teaching assistant, presented at and attended numerous professional society meetings, and participated actively in departmental and interdisciplinary program seminars and events

Following graduation, Michele plans to pursue a Ph.D. in invasive species ecology and management.



Matt Berg graduated in May 2014, having completed his doctoral work with Dr. Brad Wilcox and Dr. Sorin Popescu. As a doctoral student, Matt held a UDSA National Needs Fellowship and Tom Slick Graduate Research Fellowship. Throughout his time in ESSM, Matt has maintained a consistently high academic performance; served as a top-rated teaching assistant, partnering one semester with Dr. Wilcox to redesign and teach a watershed analysis course; regularly filled student leadership roles in the department, such as serving as the ESSM delegate to the TAMU Graduate Student Council and as the student member of the department head hiring committee; and

frequently presented at and participated in professional society meetings.

Matt's doctoral research focused on the impact of rangeland erosion on water quantity and quality in reservoirs in Central Texas. Water availability was at the heart of the study. Results from Matt's research will inform land use and water policy decision-making in Texas.

Over Matt's graduate career, he received numerous accolades and awards that reflect his achievements. In 2012 Matt received the department's Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant award. In 2013 he was awarded 2<sup>nd</sup> place for his oral presentation at the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Soil Survey and Land Resource Workshop. In 2013 he also won the Ecological Society of America's Graduate Student Policy Award. In 2014 he placed 2<sup>nd</sup> on the TAMU 3-Minute Thesis competition, received the Future Leader in Science Award from the Agronomy Society of America/Crop Science Society of America/Soil Science Society of America and was selected for a 2014 U.S. Senator Phil Gramm Doctoral Fellowship.

As a recently minted Ph.D., Matt has his sights on a range of possibilities, from water development projects with an engineering firm to a post as a government scientist or regional natural resources manager.



Carissa Wonka is finishing a doctoral degree with Dr. Bill Rogers and Dr. Urs Kreuter. As a doctoral student, Carissa held a USDA National Needs Fellowship and Tom Slick Graduate Research Fellowship.

Additional awards and accolades that Carissa received over the course of her graduate career in ESSM include: TAMU Graduate Merit Fellowship (as a master's student), 2008 ESSM Outstanding Student of the Year Award-Master's level, 2009 TAMU Ecological Integration Symposium-1<sup>st</sup> place poster presentation, 2013 Society for Range Management-1<sup>st</sup> place graduate oral presentation, and 2013 PERC (Property and Environmental Research Center) Graduate Fellowship

Carissa's research is looking at the influence of disturbance, soils, and socio-economic constraints on plant community responses to restoration efforts aimed at brush reduction in encroached semi-arid rangelands. This work will be potentially transformative for ecological science and will help stakeholders achieve sound management solutions to pressing environmental problems.

Carissa also stands out as a leader in university and professional service. To note just a few accomplishments: She was an organizer for the 2010 TAMU Ecological Integration Symposium, has been active in departmental and interdisciplinary program seminars and events, was a key teaching assistant in several courses, delivered guest lectures in ESSM classes, gave numerous presentations at

professional society meetings, published five peer-reviewed manuscripts and has four more in preparation, and has served as a manuscript peer-referee for the journal *Plant Ecology*.

In August 2014, Carissa will start a post doctoral research appointment at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln Department of Agronomy and Horticulture. She will work with Dr. Dirac Twidwell, an ESSM graduate program alumnus, on a broad range of studies with a focus on social-ecological feedbacks in fire-driven ecosystems.



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