

Corals and cacti: ASU grad is building a future in conservation science

By Kevin Bushaw, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

Inspired by childhood trips to the ocean and years spent exploring the Sonoran Desert, Ariana Ewell is building a future in conservation science that bridges ecosystems, research and community engagement.

Having completed her master's degree in biology through Arizona State University's [accelerated master's program](#), which helps students graduate faster by combining undergraduate and graduate-level courses, and having received a [Graduate College Accelerated Masters Award](#), Ewell has channeled her passion for both desert and marine ecosystems into a focus on conservation ecology and is graduating this spring debt-free.

Below, Ewell elaborates on her ASU experience, her professional goals and her passion for conservation.

Question: What got you interested in this field?

Answer: I grew up watching PBS and David Attenborough documentaries with my parents. My family also went to San Diego every year, so the ocean always fascinated me.

In elementary school, I swore I would be a marine biologist. I even created a science fair project about how ocean acidification degrades shells, and I ended up winning my district science fair with it.

Q: What brought you to the Desert Botanical Garden?

A: I've been coming here since I was 6 or 7 years old, so it always felt familiar and connected to home. Later, when I was in college, I learned about the research being done here and interned here and at the [Southwest Urban Integrated Field Laboratory](#), working on stinknet removal and urban environmental research. It really connected with me because I was doing work that impacted the community where I grew up.

Q: What's your favorite thing about the desert and the ocean?

A: My favorite thing about the desert is its history. The Sonoran Desert has deep Indigenous roots, and as a Hispanic person, that's very meaningful to me. Indigenous communities have practiced conservation here for generations, and modern scientists are only now recognizing how valuable many of those approaches are.

With the ocean, I love the sense of discovery. We've explored less than 5% of it, which I think is fascinating.

People joke that I work with both cacti and corals because they're both endangered and kind of resemble each other, and that comparison makes sense to me!

Q: How did you find out about the accelerated master's program?

A: My undergraduate degree was in biological sciences with a concentration in conservation biology and ecology.

I got an email telling me I qualify. It took me a while to decide if I wanted to do it because grad school is usually this big, scary thing. I reached out to the graduate advisor, and that's when I decided to pursue it. Among the master's options, I chose biology for its greater flexibility.

Q: Can you talk more about the classes you were passionate about?

A: My research is in the Caribbean, so I wanted more experience learning about tropical environments.

I took a tropical ecology course through the [Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation](#) because [Molina Walters](#) runs the environmental education program.

I took courses through the [School of Ocean Futures](#), including Imagining Ocean Futures with [Cliff Kapono](#), a world-renowned surfer.

I also just finished [Greg Asner](#)'s coral discussion class, which was really enlightening, and I hope to continue working with him.

Q: If you had \$40 million to invest in your field, what would you do?

A: I would go to Hawaii because I've actually never seen corals in their natural habitat and collaborate with Greg Asner. My work is focused on the Caribbean, specifically the Mesoamerican Reef, which is the largest reef in the Western Hemisphere.

Because it spans developing countries, there often isn't enough funding dedicated to conservation there. I'd love to bring some of the advanced coral research and monitoring work happening elsewhere to the Caribbean.

Q: What's next for you?

A: One thing I'm really grateful for is being able to graduate debt-free. [The Graduate College](#) was so helpful throughout my journey.

I'm taking things slowly. I've done a lot already between undergrad and grad school, so I want to gain more professional experience while continuing my work.

Eventually, I'd like to pursue a PhD in ecology, but first, I want to better understand the relationships between nonprofits, governments and environmental organizations through hands-on experience.

Q: What advice would you give students considering an accelerated master's program?

Do your research and think carefully about what attracts you to grad school. It's important to have a mission and a purpose behind what you want your master's degree to do for you.

I'd really encourage students interested in the environment, whether recreationally or professionally, to join [Nature at ASU](#). We're one of the largest environmental student organizations on campus and welcome both graduate and undergraduate students. We volunteer with community partners and organize experiences like private tours at the [Desert Botanical Garden](#), visits to the [Phoenix Zoo](#) and trips to [Biosphere 2](#). It's also a welcoming community for students from all over the world.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Ariana Ewell at Desert Botanical Garden, where she serves as program officer for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Cactus and Succulent Plants Specialist Group. Courtesy

photo