

Connor Houston, BA, MSA

It has been an adventuresome and culturally diverse road that Connor has travelled in his journey from undergraduate arts student to his present professional role as GIS Support Specialist with Orion Technology Inc. Connor caught the **volunteer spirit** early in his academic career. As a first year student in Geography and Environmental Studies at Laurier, Connor was interested in discovering a meaningful career path but was unsure of the opportunities available within his area of study.

In the summer of his first year, Connor approached Parks Canada and offered to volunteer in whatever capacity they could use his skills. It was during his summer mapping trails for the parks that Connor discovered his aptitude for using computer technology and geographic information systems (GIS). By interacting with professionals in the field of environmental sciences, Connor was able to more clearly determine his long-term **career goals** and choose a graduate program of study that would closely match his unique strengths, skills and values.

After completing his Master of Spatial Analysis Degree Program (MSA) from the University of Toronto and Ryerson University, Connor stumbled upon a very different type of **volunteer experience**. While researching international work opportunities, Connor found himself drawn to the Atlantic Rainforest and Conservation Centre in Iracambi, Brazil. Since Connor was more interested in matching his specific area of interest to the job than he was to seeking exclusively paid employment opportunities, he decided to further expand his **career knowledge** in the fields of GIS and global positioning systems (GPS).

In Iracambi, Connor was privileged to work with volunteers and researchers from all over the world in the area of rainforest conservation. Connor was given a management role whereby he was responsible for supervising other volunteers as well as overseeing an entire project. It was in this leadership position that Connor gained **valuable professional skills** in the area of co-ordination, planning, fund-raising and motivating others. As one of few highly-trained graduates offering their services to Iracambi, Connor's expertise was enthusiastically received, and he was able to use his knowledge to generate much needed funding for the organization. In addition, Connor considers the **personal value** of his volunteering "priceless", as he learned a tremendous amount about his personal likes and dislikes as well as the intricate workings of international non-profit organizations.

Reflecting on the impact of his diverse volunteer experiences, Connor offers the following advice to students and alumni: "If you are unsure of your career path, volunteering provides a great opportunity to test the job first and also to make a real difference by helping others. By volunteering, you gain priceless experience and contribute to your own **career development**. Find a place where you can contribute your skills and ideas to your community; the world may benefit from your efforts". Indeed, Connor found his passion for Internet mapping and project management as a direct result of his undergraduate and post-graduate **volunteer exposure**; experiences which led him directly to his ideal job fit as GIS Support Specialist with Orion Technology Inc.