Seafha Ramos, PhD Candidate
Yurok/Karuk/Chicana
Hometown: Crescent City, Calif.
Reported by Amanda Bahe / Photographed by Gilbert Lujan Rivera Jr. and Amanda Bahe

Ramos is a doctoral candidate in the School of Natural Resources and the Environment at the UA. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree from Missouri Southern State University with a major in biology and her Master of Science degree in wildlife conservation and management from the UA. Ramos works part time for the National Park Service (NPS) and is a UA/Sloan Indigenous Graduate Partnership Scholar. She grew up in northwest California and credits her mom as being her catalyst into the sciences. Ramos recognizes the value of fostering relationships with others – from tribal council members to lab mates – in order to achieve success. In her dissertation, Ramos highlights traditional knowledge as a way to show that cultural values and beliefs are valid ways of thinking about the environment alongside Western science. Ramos hopes to eventually return to her home state to share her findings and experiences with her community as a teacher.

Q: How is your field of study important to your community?
I’m working with the Yurok tribe and using both our traditional knowledge and science in wildlife research. I conducted interviews with Yurok people and asked them questions regarding their beliefs and values toward wildlife. The other part is a wildlife survey where another tribal member and I collected wildlife scats from Yurok ancestral lands. Two lab technicians and I are analyzing those in the lab. Scats are fecal matter.
The actual data itself— all of the raw data and the analyses — will all be given to the tribe. They already have access to all of the GPS locations of all the scats. I will also be giving them the data and interviews that are able to be donated to the tribe, through the institutional review board (IRB). All researchers who are working with people must go through the IRB process.
So far we’ve been doing the species identification of all the scats – basically, what species the scat came from. And then we’re also exploring the diet of mesocarnivores and are exploring the protocols for how to do the diet analysis – we want to make sure we have the protocol correct before we do all of them. Karla, who works with me in the lab, analyzed the first
sample and found it to be a Humboldt marten (who-pey-roks in the Yurok language), which is really, really important environmentally because that species was recently petitioned for the endangered species list. Just that one sample shed some light on what’s going on with the wildlife community. It’s pretty cool!

Q: Is there a cultural aspect to the type of work you do?

One goal that I had from the beginning was to conduct a wildlife study that does take our culture into account. I didn’t want to just pursue a scientific study. So, in that way, I think that my study’s really important for our community. I’ve made a goal to show and demonstrate that our cultural beliefs and values are equally as valid as science. I asked the tribal council before I even applied [to graduate school] if they would allow me to conduct a study with the community. Thankfully, they said yes. I actually asked a couple other committees too so, with their and my family’s blessings and permission, I went ahead. In the interviews, participants discuss the importance of wildlife to Yurok culture. The wildlife part of my study is important for Yurok culture because we have an important relationship with animals, for food and ceremony.

Q: What are some things that you did to prepare for life as a graduate student?

When I was in high school, I really tried hard to get good grades because I knew that I wanted to go to college. Fortunately, I ended up being accepted to an honor’s program for undergrad and because I made such good grades and I did really well. They covered my tuition for all four years and that was huge, I mean, huge! I probably could’ve still gone to college but I would’ve taken out loans. Also, just really tried to be open to opportunities –

internships or volunteer work. I think I completed two internships in undergrad and I know those helped me get into graduate school. In terms of preparing for my PhD, I really have focused a lot on the spiritual component – making emotional health a goal.

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