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BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

FROM FIELD LEARNING TO FORESTRY LEADERSHIP

HOW ENVIROTHON SHAPED JESSICA'S LIFELONG PATH
IN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE AND FORESTRY

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NCF - Envirothon

The Envirothon is North America's largest environmental competition, engaging over 25,000 high school students across the United States, Canada, China, and Singapore. It provides hands-on, STEM-based learning in forestry, soils, wildlife, aquatic ecology, and current environmental issues. Students work in teams to solve real-world environmental challenges through field-based activities. The program builds critical thinking, leadership, and communication skills while promoting environmental stewardship.

Meet Jessica Kurtis



Jessica was raised in western New York in a family deeply connected to the outdoors. Much of her childhood was spent climbing trees and working on the family's Christmas tree farm. This early connection to the land inspired her to earn a degree in environmental science from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke and pursue graduate studies in ecophysiology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

She began her career with the U.S. Forest Service Forest Inventory and Analysis, analyzing data to understand forestry trends and support sustainable ecosystem management.

In August 2025, she transitioned to Enviva as a sustainability specialist where she works to translate scientific insights into practical strategies and support the application of environmental data in sustainable forestry decision-making.

Now based in East Tennessee, Jessica maintains an active outdoor lifestyle, gardening, caring for her apiary, hiking, kayaking, and playing soccer. She lives with her partner, Collin, and their two dogs and cat.

Early Exposure to Envirothon

Jessica's experience with Envirothon began long before high school. Although she was officially involved from her freshman through senior years, her connection to the program started in childhood. Her mother served as an organizer for both the New York State and National Envirothon competitions, which meant Jessica grew up immersed in the program.

During elementary and middle school, she often helped behind the scenes by assisting with event preparation, developing test questions, and organizing study materials. This early exposure gave her a strong understanding of how the program functioned and the purpose it served in environmental education.

High School Involvement and Continued Engagement

Jessica officially joined Envirothon during high school and remained actively involved through all four years. After graduating, she continued her engagement by volunteering with the New York State Envirothon for four years during her undergraduate studies. This transition from participant to volunteer allowed her to experience the program from multiple perspectives while continuing to support student learning and competition preparation.

Why Envirothon Was a Natural Fit

Jessica's decision to join Envirothon in high school felt like a natural extension of her upbringing and interests. Having been exposed to the program for years, she already understood its value in building leadership, teamwork, and applied environmental knowledge.

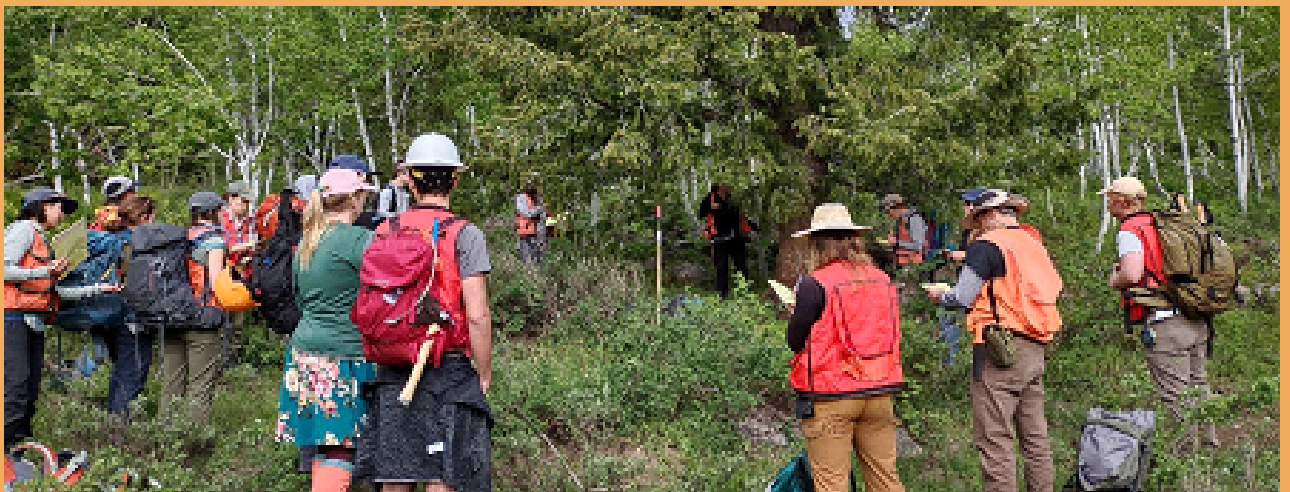
With a strong personal interest in environmental science, Envirothon provided an opportunity to explore that passion in a hands-on, real world setting that went beyond traditional classroom learning.

Favorite Experiences and Key Learning Moments

Some of Jessica's most meaningful experiences came from the hands-on field activities and the Current Issues component of the competition.

Fieldwork such as tree identification, soil analysis, and water quality assessments made environmental science feel engaging and practical. These activities helped her connect classroom concepts to real ecosystems.

The Current Issues portion also stood out, focusing on topics like renewable energy, deforestation, water pollution, and environmental economics. This experience strengthened her critical thinking, teamwork, and public speaking skills as she worked with her team to analyze and present complex environmental challenges.



Leading field training for seasonal forestry technicians in FIA data collection and forest mensuration techniques in Utah.

The Power of Teamwork and Collaboration

One of the most lasting lessons for Jessica was the importance of teamwork. Envirothon showed her that every individual brings unique strengths to a group and that success depends on collaboration and trust.

She learned how to rely on others' expertise while also building confidence in her own knowledge and decision making. These experiences helped her develop strong communication skills and laid the foundation for leadership in her professional life.

Academic and Career Influence

Envirothon played a significant role in shaping Jessica's academic and career path. It strengthened her interest in environmental science and influenced her decision to pursue coursework in forestry, botany, and ecology.

Many of the skills she developed, especially through field based learning, translated directly into her forestry career. Tree identification, field measurements, and ecosystem assessments gave her a strong practical foundation that made the transition into professional fieldwork much smoother.



Field measurements in the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia, collecting forest inventory data as part of ongoing forest monitoring efforts.

The Role of the Forestry Sector in Envirothon

The involvement of the forestry sector added depth and real world relevance to Jessica's experience. Industry professionals regularly participated as instructors and mentors, sharing insights into forest management, sustainability practices, and current industry challenges.

These interactions helped bridge the gap between classroom learning and professional application. Jessica gained a clearer understanding of how forestry decisions are made in practice and how ecological and economic considerations are balanced in real world settings.

Forestry Based Skills and Field Experiences

Jessica participated in a wide range of forestry related activities, including tree identification, measuring tree height and diameter, and assessing forest health issues such as pests and diseases.

She also learned how environmental factors like soil type, slope, and elevation influence forest growth and ecosystem health. These experiences helped her understand the complexity of forest systems and the importance of sustainable management practices.

Why Industry Involvement Matters

Jessica believes that greater involvement from the forestry sector in programs like Envirothon can strengthen workforce development and better prepare students for future careers.

As forestry increasingly incorporates technologies like GIS and remote sensing, early exposure to both traditional field skills and modern tools is essential. Industry engagement also helps students understand real world challenges and the role forestry plays in addressing environmental issues such as climate change, deforestation, and clean energy development.

Lasting Lessons and Takeaways

One of Jessica's biggest takeaways from Envirothon is the interconnectedness of environmental systems and the importance of responsible resource management. Her long term involvement deepened her appreciation for how science, ecology, and economics all influence environmental decision making.

Envirothon also expanded her understanding of forestry as a career field, introducing her to new opportunities and professionals she may not have otherwise encountered. Ultimately, it helped shape both her academic interests and her professional direction in environmental science and forestry.