Interview with Shaun Turney

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Q: Could you please state your name and affiliation?

Shaun Turney: My name is Shaun Turney and I'm a PhD student in McGill's Natural Resource Sciences department. I study insect ecology, meaning I study how insects interact with each other and with their environment. For example, a project that I'm working on right now is I'm writing about an experiment I did last summer in the Yukon. I had groups of spiders and I varied the diversity of those groups of spiders, so that means I changed how many species there were or how related those species were, because I wanted to see how the diversity of that spider group affected how much prey they could eat as a group.

Q: Why is diversity important to you?

S: I think there's some interesting parallels between the reasons for realizing why biodiversity is important in nature and why diversity is important in STEM. So, one of the main reasons why biodiversity is important is because if you have different species, each species excels at doing different things within the ecosystem, so the more species you have, the more likely that all of the things that need to get done in an ecosystem, its functions – all of them are fulfilled and functioning properly. By analogy, in STEM if you have diversity of people who come from different backgrounds, they'll have different perspectives, different ways of looking at the world, different ways of approaching a problem, and the thing that we're doing in science or technology or engineering will get done better, because there's all these different approaches that are happening.

Q: Tell us about your own personal journey in academia as a student in biology. How did your interest in biology develop?

S: Well, I've always been interested in the outdoors and nature and animals and being outside, but I didn't actually start in biology. When I started my university career, I actually started in engineering and I realized that it wasn't really for me, and then I decided to sort of think more about what I did want to do, so I changed to a degree in general science. I took some biology classes, I realized I really liked biology, so I switched to biology, and then I took some ecology classes – I really liked those, so I took more ecology classes until I decided I wanted to do graduate studies in ecology, and that's where I am now, working on a PhD in Ecology.

Q: Could you tell us about some difficulties you faced along the way?

S: One difficulty was figuring out what I wanted to do. I didn't want to do engineering, and it took a little while to figure that out, but once I figured out what my passion was, then things became a lot easier. I got better grades, I was happier. Things go more smoothly if you're doing something that you enjoy.

Q: What were some of the things you did to figure that out?

S: Well, I tried to sort of take a step back when I realized I didn't want to do engineering, so I took all sorts of different classes in a lot of different areas. I took some philosophy classes, I took some sociology classes. Physics, math, biology. I just thought about which of those I enjoyed the most and which ones made me excited to learn more.

Q: Were there any instances you feel that you were treated differently because you're a transgender man?

S: For the most part, I've been treated really fairly, I think. Most of the people that I've interacted with in science have been good people who are open-minded and who engage with the ideas of their colleagues rather than whatever particular traits they have. That being said, I do think I probably have at times been treated differently. It's a hard question to answer, because it's difficult to distinguish between what are experiences I've had just being me and what are part of more like a broader experience of being transgender in science. That's not really a cultural conversation that's happening and what is the experience being a transgender person in STEM, at least not in the same way as, for example, for women in STEM. But, there are some things that I think are general struggles that transgender have in STEM. Things like difficulty getting people to respect what pronouns you prefer – he or she or some other pronoun. Maybe difficulty with feeling safe in bathrooms around the university or whatever facilities. Maybe insensitive jokes that are at the expense of transgender people. Things like that.

Q: So, is there anything specific that you can think of that your colleagues or professors can be more mindful of when interacting with transgender people in science?

S: I suppose the most general advice is to treat the person – well, the golden rule – how you want to be treated and how you would treat any colleague or student or whatever the case may be. But more specifically, it's important to make sure you call people the pronouns – like he or she, for example – that they want to be called. You might take someone aside and say "Listen, I'm not sure what pronouns I should use with you – he or she." You might not want to do that in a public situation, because if someone's not sure or they're not out, meaning they're not comfortable talking publicly about being transgender, then it's probably a better conversation to have in private and just avoid using pronouns until you know. That's another solution: if you don't know what someone's pronouns are, just use their name instead. Say "they" instead. There's ways around it. Certainly, there are things to be more proactive about. Helping to advocate for gender neutral bathrooms, both at the university, but, for example, at conferences as well. If you hear someone say something that's transphobic or that is just insensitive or rude towards transgender people – to say something because that is something that might be unsafe or uncomfortable for a transgender person to do. As someone who wants to be an ally, that's a good way to support [transgender people] – or helping to change policies at the university. For example, making it easier to change their preferred name within the university paperwork.

Q: So, what are some positive experience you've had as a transgender in biology or science?

S: My experiences have been almost wholly positive. I think that for the most part, the people I've interacted with are good people and they're respectful of everybody.

Q: Do you think that's more of an exception or more of the rule?

S: I don't know, I've only worked in a few universities, so I can't really say what's a general experience. Also, I am white and able-bodied and masculine, so I'm not sure that my experiences reflect don't reflect every trans – well, I'm sure my experiences don't reflect every transgender person's experiences. I hope that it's general, but I'm not convinced that everyone has had as positive experience as I have. I think, actually, that – like I was saying before, that it's a really positive thing to have a diversity of people in STEM, because everyone brings different strengths, and I think that one of the strengths of being transgender is that almost by definition, you have to be comfortable questioning the status quo sometimes, and that's a really good quality for a scientist to have.

Q: On a similar note, what are some things that still need improvement for transgender people in science, as you really touched a bit on this?

S: In the past few years, there's been more awareness about that transgender people exist and what it is to be transgender, and that's a good first step. It's a prerequisite for the next step, more important step, which is to make sure that transgender people feel safe and welcome in STEM. That needs to happen at many different levels – at the personal level, in interactions between colleagues, in between teachers and students. Making sure that everyone is respectful, and no one is treated unfairly or differently because of their gender.

Q: Have you met many other transgender scientists?

S: No, I don't really. I know, I guess, two of my peers, like fellow graduate students, I know who are transgender. I don't know of anyone who is, like, later in their career, like a professor or researcher at an institute. I only know two fellow early career scientists, which is a shame. I wish that I had more role models in, like, how to be a transgender scientist, how to deal with colleagues in administration and other issues.

Q: Why do you think there might be such a lack of representation?

S: Well, that's a great question. It could be that there are more transgender scientists that I'm just not aware of because they're not out, they're not publicly transgender. The reason for that would be because they don't feel safe enough to be out. Another reason could be, maybe, STEM has trouble recruiting transgender people because it's not – it doesn't present itself as being a welcome and safe environment.

Q: How do you maintain a healthy balance between your career and family? Recently married?

S: Yeah, I did recently get married, and I do believe it's really important to keep a balance between your life in science, your academic life, and the rest of your life. One thing I do is I try to set limits on the hours that I'm working, so I'll decide "Okay, today I'm working from 9 am to 5 pm. At 5 pm, I make myself close everything that I'm working on, put everything away and not think about it again until it's time to work again. That's really good for [you] – because it's, like, nice to have hobbies and relationships and all that. But it's also good for your science, I think, because it gives your brain time to rest, to absorb the information, to assimilate the things

you've been thinking and learning about. So then, when you come back to work, you're a better worker.

Q: So, have you had any personal mentors in the course of your career so far?

S: Yes, I definitely have had some very good mentors all through my career, including when I was an undergrad. And that – it makes a really big difference. None of them have been transgender, which is, I think, too bad. At the same time, my mentors have been really great. When I was an undergrad, Professor Jean-Guy Godin was very helpful to me, really took me under his wing, and I did an honors project with him and I learned a lot about how to take a scientific project from start to finish. Since then, my supervisors have been big mentors to me. My master's supervisor Virginie Millien and Andy Gonzalez when I did my biology master's degree at McGill. Now, Gregor Fussmann and Chris Buttle have been big mentors to me as I've been doing my PhD.

Q: Life mentors?

S: Life mentors! Well, my parents, obviously. I read a lot of science fiction, and I definitely feel inspired by my favourite writers to think creatively and to think about what the future could look like, both in terms of good paths we can take, but also bad paths we can take. So, yeah, I feel very inspired by science fiction. It's not exactly mentors, but it's still, like –

Q: Any recommendations for the viewers?

S: One of my favourite writers is Neil Stevenson. He's a very good writer. He sort of goes between genres, some science fiction with fantasy elements and historical fiction.

Q: What advice do you have for someone who is interested in biology or becoming a biologist?

S: I would say that you should go for it, because it's a really good life, being a scientist and being a biologist. In particular, you get to ask questions that you find interesting and come up with creative ways to fine the answers to those questions. Interact with really intelligent, interesting people, and if it's something that you want to do, then take lots of biology classes, read about biology, spend time in nature thinking about what you find interesting. Maybe try to find a mentor to help you figure out how to achieve whatever it is you want to achieve, be it getting into university in a biology program or whatever. Yeah, go for it!

Q: What would you say to a transgender person trying to pursue a career in biology?

S: I would say you should also go for it, for all of the same reasons. There's definitely going to be hurdles along the way, but that's true for whatever career you choose. If it's what you're interested in, then the challenges are worth it. You should go for it.

Q: Any final thoughts?

S: There's definitely still a long way to go for transgender people in science and for diversity in STEM overall. That can be a bit daunting, but it's also exciting, because we've already accomplished a lot – in sciences a lot to contribute – and it's only going to get better with more diversity. It's also really amazing that there are so many people who want to make sure everyone

is welcome and safe. That's a really heartening thing. It's daunting, but it's also really exciting. It's an exciting time to be in STEM.