#IamPhysSci - Christopher Leong, B.S., Earth System Science

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An adventurous spirit with a deep passion for the environment, Leong's academic and extracurricular pursuits have laid the groundwork for an impactful career in environmental science.

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Lucas Joel

As an avid cyclist, backpacker, rock climber and amateur boxer, it was only natural that Christopher Leong made an adventure out of his college selection process. Upon receiving their college acceptances, he and his childhood friend hopped in his car and drove from Northern California to Southern California in one day, stopping at their prospective colleges along the way. Their last stop – UC Irvine – stood out for its beautiful outdoor spaces and desirable southern California location. “I knew as soon as I was on campus that this was the college I wanted to attend,” Leong recalled.

Four years on, Leong hasn’t wasted a second of his time as a UCI undergraduate. An adventurous spirit with a deep passion for the environment, his academic and extracurricular pursuits have laid the groundwork for an impactful career in environmental science.

Originally from South San Francisco, Leong began at UCI as an environmental engineering major. However, his curiosity and passion for the outdoors led him to switch his major to Earth System Science.

Perhaps the most defining part of Leong's undergraduate career is his involvement in research that not only challenged him intellectually but also offered him opportunities to connect with nature in profound ways.

His research story began in the W. M. Keck Carbon Cycle Accelerator Mass (KCCAM) Spectrometer Facility, where, under Dr. Guaciara dos Santos’ supervision, he prepared tree ring samples for carbon dating and mass spectrometry testing.

It was in the KCCAM facility that he spotted a mug adorned with the words “Toolik Field Station,” a research station in Alaska. “I wanted my own Toolik mug as soon I saw it,” Leong recalled. But there was a catch – the only way to get a mug was to do field research at the remote Alaska station. The Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program at UCI provided the funding Leong needed for the research trip to Alaska. While in Alaska, Leong collaborated with Professor Alex Guenther's research group. Their work focused on the emissions of Arctic sedges and their unique response to warming conditions—a project that allowed Leong to contribute to the understanding of biogenic volatile organic compounds (BVOCs) and their impact on aerosol and cloud formation.

His Alaskan expedition served as a professional development milestone and a personal journey that allowed him to explore the great Alaska expanse with his father during a nine-day research break.

Leong's achievements and personal growth at UCI were greatly influenced by a supportive community of faculty, mentors and peers. Professors like Claudia Czimzik, Angela Rigden and Alex Guenther, alongside graduate mentors and friends like Hui Wang and Collin Richardson, played instrumental roles in nurturing his academic path, giving him opportunities, guidance and encouragement every step of the way.

Looking to the future, Chris’s immediate post-graduation plan is to embark on a long-haul bike trip from Los Angeles to San Francisco, and to plan other adventures that feed his love of the outdoors. With aspirations of working in environmental consulting or doing fieldwork for a water district, Chris's journey is a testament to the transformative power of education and mentorship at UCI.

As he prepares to graduate, Leong carries with him the spirit of exploration and environmental stewardship that defines the mission of the UCI School of Physical Sciences Department of Earth System Science.

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