Of Satellites and Turkey
by Holly Davis

I wrote this sample in the style of the "This I Believe" essays on NPR (http://www.npr.org/series/4538138/this-i-believe), while a student in Duke University's Master of Environmental Management program.

Satellite imagery and Thanksgiving dinner. Most people would be hard pressed to make a connection between the two, but for me, both have influenced my decision to become an environmental professional.

Thanksgiving dinner at my parent's home, always involves the same elaborate menu. Dad specializes in proper turkey roasting technique, while Mom presides over the dinner as a whole, and makes the stuffing and candied yams. "The Kids'" roles, however, are not well defined, other than a vague notion that we should be helping out. As a result, each Thanksgiving I end up delegating tasks. While peeling onions or making a sauce, I often mentally step back to evaluate what still needs to be done and then rope my siblings into completing the needed tasks. I would like to think my actions are motivated by some noble character trait, but the truth is I do not want to be the only one working while everyone else chills out eating chips and dip. After many Thanksgivings, I have begun to see this compulsion to coordinate - to step back to look at the big picture while keeping a bead on any details that might impede forward motion if ignored - as a skill I could cultivate in a professional capacity to get a job.

Speaking of work, this is where the satellite imagery comes into play. Rarely do I find a map provocative enough to make my jaw drop; however on a foggy day this past summer in Monterey, I saw such an image. I was attending an Ocean Satellite Workshop for my job and the presenter showed a map of how sea level in 2005 compared to the average sea level for the previous 13 years. The areas that caught my attention were those along the West Coast where sea level had fallen during the 13-year period. Given that discussions of sea level often focus on global sea level rise, I had been lulled into thinking that all locations were experiencing rising waters, so the evidence of regional sea level fall startled me. I asked the workshop presenter if coastal planners addressing sea level change for their local area were taking into account the data shown on this map. His answer, that most people were using the IPCC global mean sea level rise predictions alone and not factoring in local trends, including sea level fall, sparked a long-held desire to focus on regional climate change and how communities and organizations can adapt to the changes they are likely to face in the future.

This desire to help others adapt to climate change, in combination with my compulsion to coordinate, leads to my becoming an environmental professional who can say with conviction: I believe in looking at the big picture and evaluating as objectively as possible how best to move forward, while still paying attention to the details that can make a huge difference in the final outcome, details such as sea level falling instead of rising in Astoria, Oregon.

###