

GRADUATE AG RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT



Yuling Gao

*"People think social science is easy. Actually, human behaviors are the most difficult thing to predict."
Yuling Gao, PhD student, Forestry and Natural Resources*

THE STUDENT: One of Yuling Gao's favorite things to do is to walk through cities and observe how residents interact with the environment. The native of central China has taken full advantage of graduate study in the United States to explore its major cities from coast to coast. Gao studied geography from an interdisciplinary perspective at Nanjing Normal University. She then earned a master's degree in city/urban, community and regional planning at Rutgers University, where she enjoyed its proximity to New York City. Her involvement in research related to New Jersey's transportation and water infrastructures confirmed her passion for environmental science. A job posting that fit her interest in social science from a planning perspective drew her to Purdue in January 2015. "Here you can choose outside your own program," she says, citing flexibility as a strength. Classes in communication, statistics and data management have been particularly helpful in her research.

THE RESEARCH: Gao works in the Natural Resource Social Science lab, where she conducts quantitative and qualitative research to understand factors influencing behavior related to environmental practices. Specifically, she wants to know people's perceptions about the adoption, maintenance and diffusion of urban stormwater conservation practices, such as rain barrels and rain gardens along

the Wabash River in Tippecanoe County. "Models can measure the effectiveness of practices, but if you don't understand people's intentions, you can't promote the implementation of practices," she explains.

SPEAKING UP: Professor of Natural Resource Social Science Linda Prokopy has encouraged her self-described "shy" research assistant to speak up. "As a scientist, you need to voice your ideas," Gao explains. "My advisor provides research guidance and other kinds of training that make me a good person, not just a good researcher." Her peers in the lab are an additional source of support and ideas, she adds. And as a teaching assistant for an undergraduate course on GIS (geographic information systems), Gao appreciates both the students and the mapmaking.

FUTURE PLANS: Gao expects to complete her PhD in August and hopes to spend a year or two in research at a university or nonprofit. She is committed to making environmentally friendly decisions in her everyday life, and as a social scientist, is a keen observer of others' actions. "People know they have environmental responsibility, but it's hard to change a behavior," she says. "I like to investigate why." In her spare time, she enjoys yoga, walking trails, and taking street photos in urban settings.