Professor Beth DeSombre assigned each student in her ES 325: International Environmental Law course a specific treaty on which they’d become an expert throughout a series of research assignments. These assignments prepared us to evaluate the effectiveness of our treaty at addressing an environmental collective action problem. Because of my interest in ocean-related issues, Professor DeSombre assigned me the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL). I had to research the treaty’s structure, its negotiation process, and its implementation, all of which would allow me to craft this research paper on its effectiveness.

One of the first places I looked for information was my secretariat's—the International Maritime Organization (IMO)—website. Unfortunately, compared to other secretariats, the IMO did not have much information available. This meant I had to concentrate my research in other secondary and primary sources. Using the Wellesley College Library's SuperSearch and InterLibrary Loan program, I found books either written entirely about or containing excerpts on my treaty. One of the most useful books I found was recommended to me by Professor DeSombre: Intentional Oil Pollution at Sea: Environmental Policy and Treaty Compliance by Ronald Mitchell. This book provided an overview of my treaty and its negotiation process, as well as an initial analysis of the treaty's implementation and effectiveness. From this starting point, I then could better direct my primary source research in newspaper archives and my secondary source research in academic journals. I also learned how to use the Nexis Uni legal database to locate law journal articles that included relevant legal discourses to inform my research. Prior to this course, I had never worked with legal sources and was initially overwhelmed. Thanks to the help of our research librarian, Daria Hafner, I grew more comfortable working with this new source type.

One of the skills I worked on throughout my research process was how to efficiently research detailed information. For initial assignments leading up to this final paper, Professor DeSombre provided us with lists of questions, all of which needed to be answered. It was up to us to decide the necessary information to answer those questions. For example, one question asked who gained and who lost from the treaty. I first had to think about what it would look like to "gain" or "lose," then figure out what data I would need to find to prove my argument about those gains and losses. I began including more specifications in my searches by using boolean
operators, constricting dates, and using longer combinations of keywords to yield more precise information.

To determine the effectiveness of MARPOL, I had to assess both the environmental problem it was addressing and relevant actors' behavior before and after the treaty's implementation—the assumption being if the environmental problem and actors' behavior had changed positively after the treaty, the treaty may (to some extent) have been effective at engineering that change. My first task was to decide how to even measure such metrics. I had to distinguish between, for example, the amount of oil in the oceans (environmental problem) versus the amount of oil being discharged into the ocean from ships (actors' behavior). These data were the hardest for me to track down. Oftentimes, I had to rely on anecdotal evidence or proxies to draw my own informed conclusions. One piece of evidence I'm most proud of finding is data about recent MARPOL violations in the Paris and Tokyo Memorandum of Understandings (MOU) on Port State Control. This was the proxy I used for actors' behavior regarding intentional discharge. I went through each year's report and compiled the number of violations for each MARPOL Annex to create my own figures that showed an overall downward trend in violations.

Once I had all my research, I was able to craft my thesis. I knew based on my research I would argue that MARPOL was effective at addressing a global collective action problem, but I wasn't sure how to make that argument in the most persuasive way. I spent a long time considering various elements of my research from the treaty's structure to its negotiation and implementation process, ultimately coming up with two main reasons why the treaty is effective. I think stepping back to organize my research at this higher, two-category level was what helped make my thesis as strong as it was. It allowed me to synthesize everything I had done and prove to myself why the data I was using was clear and compelling.

Throughout this project I learned the importance of researching effectively using a wide variety of sources, how to think critically about necessary information to prove arguments to myself and others, and that really stepping back to think about an argument can strengthen how I communicate my findings. And finally, with the continuous support of the Wellesley College Library, Professor DeSombre, and my peers, I learned to trust myself more throughout the entire research process.