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ASM-AIBS PUBLIC POLICY FELLOW REPORT

The following account was written by Natalie G. Dawson, the 2006 American Society of Mammalogists (ASM)—American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS) Public Policy Fellow. Ms. Dawson, a Ph.D. student at the University of New Mexico, describes activities in which she was involved during her 3-month experience in Washington, D. C., emphasizing the relevance of this experience to her research interests and future career aspirations.

''As the 2006 ASM-AIBS Public Policy Fellow, I had the opportunity to spend 3 months in Washington, D.C. from September to December 2006. This opportunity was my first exposure to public policy at both the national and international level. The internship gave me an opportunity to be involved in activities on Capitol Hill, including hearings, briefings, and legislative meetings, as well as numerous other public policy forums around the D.C. area.

''My first 2 weeks in Washington coincided with the 109th Congress. I attended several hearings on the hill, primarily focused on climate change and the various plans and initiatives that have been outlined by members of Congress and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). It was valuable to listen to scientific testimony at Congressional hearings and see how testimony is crafted, considering that scientists have only 5 minutes to discuss their research and research findings before they are questioned by members of the House and Senate, who may or may not have any experience or knowledge in the subject of the hearing. It was a clear example of how important it is for the scientific community to be able to craft compelling, scientifically sound research summaries into statements that can be communicated clearly and directly to all interested parties.

''I was fortunate to be in Washington during an election cycle. I used this time to focus on many small projects that delved into various topics in science policy. I wrote bi-weekly public policy reports for AIBS that were disseminated to all member organizations. These articles covered both national and international science policy issues, such as federal regulation changes, agency report summaries, regional and national political races, and summaries of the November 2006 elections. I also wrote an article for the AIBS journal BioScience about postdoctoral students in the USA (Dawson, N. G. 2007. Post post-doc: are new scientists prepared for the real world? BioScience 57:16).

''One of the projects I was involved with incorporates an in-depth look at the budget history for the ''environmental mission-driven agencies'' such as the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), U. S. Forest Service (USFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA), National Park Service (NPS), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). I focused on the USFS portion of the study because of my previous experience with the Forest Service, taking the opportunity to look into budget histories for the agency as far back as 1992. The project will be part of a larger investigation that AIBS hopes to complete in Spring 2007, perhaps releasing a report about these findings to its member organizations. This project gave me the opportunity to talk with Forest Service employees and others about budget shortfalls for the agency, and the repercussions to its scientists and research programs. I also worked on a project to identify state-level science advisors to the governors, state science committees, and state science initiatives. This involved a state-by-state report of all science-related legislative and executive offices.

''One of the most valuable aspects of the internship was being based in Washington, which provided opportunities to meet colleagues and make new acquaintances. I met with the USFS director of Research and Development; National Science Foundation (NSF) personnel; members of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) and The Nature Conservancy; federal government officials within the U. S. Geologic Survey (USGS), USFS, and Department of Interior; and AAAS fellows from the EPA and NOAA. I also met Representative Tom Udall-NM, Senator Lisa Murkowski-AK, and congressional staffers for the New Mexico delegates, as well as Heather Wilson, the Representative for District 1 in New Mexico. In early November, I gave a presentation at the Smithsonian on my dissertation research on the Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska and toured the conservation genetics laboratory and the mammal and bird collections at the museum. Exposure to such a wide array of individuals and perspectives was an invaluable experience, especially for an advanced graduate student exploring career options.

''Since returning to New Mexico, I have rejoined the world of my dissertation research. Many of the skills I learned in Washington have been useful here in New Mexico. I have been involved in the revision of the Tongass Land Management Plan due to my research focus in southeast Alaska and interest in public policy. I have had several meetings and conversations with managers and local politicians about the Tongass. My experience in Washington provided incentive to remain actively involved in politics on a local scale and apply my newly honed skills to my home state. I now volunteer with an organization called 'Wild Friends' through the Institute of Public Law at the University of New Mexico. This organization helps school-age children (10-18) craft a piece of legislation each year, after which they all come to the state capitol at different times during the legislative session to help make sure that their piece of legislation makes it through the state Congress to be approved by the governor. This year, our legislation is a joint House-Senate memorial (a memorial is a call to action on a specific subject) to expand energy efficiency and conservation initiatives in New Mexico in order to reduce contributions to global warming. I have really enjoyed my experience with the organization so far, and I hope to continue working with them as I finish my Ph.D. They have been grateful to have a scientist help them with legislative matters. I am thankful to ASM and AIBS for my experiences in Washington that prepared me to become involved with this type of initiative.

''I learned more in Washington about public policy issues than I would have been able to experience through my dissertation project. I also refined other valuable skills, such as networking, and oral and written communication. Many Ph.D. students never have the chance to work in an environment outside of their immediate research area. I was granted the opportunity to talk with national policymakers about science policy in general, and at times, about my own research project on mammals on the Tongass National Forest. I have established contacts and potential references in Washington for future job searches. Best of all, I have a new set of skills for a future career in which I hope to further develop the bridge between science, policy, and community development.''

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