

Student Programs

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STUDENT PROGRAMS

REPORT FROM SARAH SMILEY, 2008 ASM-AIBS GRADUATE STUDENT PUBLIC POLICY INTERN

As the 2008 ASM-AIBS Graduate Student Public Policy Intern, I represented the American Society of Mammalogists (ASM) at the American Institute of Biological Science (AIBS) Public Policy Office in downtown Washington, DC. My fellowship at AIBS differed from those of past interns as it lasted for 6 months instead of 3. The 2nd half of my fellowship was sponsored by AIBS because they were short on policy staff. Thus, from September 2008 through February 2009, I was able to live, work, learn, and play in our nation's capital. This experience was priceless in many ways. Thanks to the staff of the AIBS Public Policy Office, led by Dr. Robert Gropp, I gained a basic understanding of how the science policy world operates. I became a part of history as I resided in the District of Columbia (DC) during the election and inauguration of President Barack Obama, as well as at a time of tremendous economic turmoil. I increased my understanding of science issues currently in the spotlight by attending briefings and symposia around DC. Overall, I would not hesitate to recommend this experience to another graduate student in mammalogy.

Upon arriving at the AIBS office, I had little experience in the public policy arena. I brought with me a strong interest in policy and management decisions that affect wildlife, a concern for the quality of science education in the US, and a willingness to learn as much as I could over the next few months. In getting oriented, the AIBS staff was helpful in pointing out websites and newspapers to monitor for policy news and hearing times. They also were very willing to answer any questions I had concerning the legislation and appropriation process. After getting settled at the office, I started by attending numerous hearings on Capitol Hill during the month of September when Congress was in session. These dealt with subjects such as the funding and role of museums and libraries, wildlife trade, emerging contaminants in water, regulation of greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act, an oversight hearing on the Bush Administration's EPA record, and the current status of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). It was amazing that, in preparation for these hearings, a wealth of hard-won information had to be condensed into a few minutes of testimony to a non-scientific audience. My attendance at the NWRS hearing led to my authoring a Washington Watch column for the AIBS journal *Bioscience* (Smiley, S. A. 2008. The Cost of Conservation: The National Wildlife Refuge System. *Bioscience* 58:1014). The message of this piece was that the NWRS lacks the resources needed to effectively carry out its conservation mission. Insufficient resources have resulted in the decline of biological monitoring on refuges and the loss of wildlife

biologist positions in this agency. Writing this column enabled me to learn how to conduct policy research and write for a mixed audience- skills that I would use repeatedly over the next few months.

One of my major responsibilities while working at AIBS was to write short policy articles for the bi-monthly Public Policy Report. These reports inform AIBS members of current science policy news. I wrote 19 policy report items during my internship. Topics included many relevant to ASM members, such as an IUCN report on the status of the world's mammals ("Mammals Perfect Disappearing Act" 10/13/08), the revamping of science education requirements in Texas ("Biology Standards Beefed Up in the Longhorn State?" 10/13/08, "Texas and science education: Here we go again" 12/8/08), the status of changes made to the Endangered Species Act (ESA) by the Bush administration ("Bush Administration finalizes ESA rule change" 12/22/08), a description of the salary, tenure status, and demographics of those working at American colleges and universities ("New report outlines status of postsecondary institutional workforce" 1/5/09), a report summarizing the state of the government's natural science collections ("Report outlines status of federal science collections" 2/2/09), and the environmental fallout caused by the building of the border fence ("Interior could receive \$50 million to mitigate environmental impacts from US-Mexico border fence" 2/2/09).

Another project that occupied my time at the AIBS Public Policy Office was the Museums and Economy: Natural Science Collections Alliance (NSCA) Survey. The NSCA is one of the member organizations of AIBS for which we conducted an online survey of U.S. natural history collection managers on how the plummeting economy was affecting their collections, visitation rates, and their ability to entice philanthropists and corporations to make donations (upon which many collections rely). I was responsible for graphing and summarizing the data that were collected from this survey. These results were then relayed to the NSCA. In addition to the survey, when Congress was creating the economic stimulus legislation, I was responsible for faxing a policy letter written jointly by AIBS and NSCA in opposition to the Coburn Amendment, which barred natural science collections from receiving any type of economic stimulus funds. It was very interesting to be involved in public policy work that documented the troubles of natural science collections, a group hit particularly hard by the tumbling economy, but also represented by an organization (the NSCA) that was actively involved in trying to improve the dismal monetary situation faced by its members.

During the election period and other slower policy weeks, I constructed a 1-page information sheet that described some of the benefits of funding mammalian research to those outside

the scientific community. The purpose of this 1-pager is for AIBS to have a fact sheet on hand, already approved by the ASM board, which could be distributed during the appropriation process or any other time when research funds might be won or are in jeopardy of being lost to other disciplines. In the policy world, it is important to act quickly. Thus, I hope that even if the ASM does not use my particular 1-pager that they follow through on the idea of having such material available in the AIBS office for any unforeseen uses that might arise in the future.

Another project that I spent a significant amount of time working on was maintaining the AIBS Federal Register Resource. The *United States Federal Register* is a publication released daily by the federal government that provides the official announcement of federal rules, proposed rules, notices, and executive orders and documents. The AIBS website has a page called the Federal Register Resource, where select science-related announcements that are of interest to their members are drawn from the federal publication and made more accessible. The AIBS Federal Register Resource is updated on a weekly basis. I was responsible for going through each *Federal Register* publication, selecting relevant articles, and posting these on the AIBS webpage. Reading the *Federal Register* was a good way to more fully comprehend the series of steps that rules go through from being proposed to becoming finalized. I also learned that many federal meetings are advertised in this manner, with a large number being open to public participation.

One of the things that I really appreciated about working in the District of Columbia was the availability of briefings, meetings, and events that examine issues at the interface of science and policy. I was able to attend a seminar given by the British science advisor, several briefings held on Capitol Hill, a meeting of the Bird Conservation Alliance on migratory bird conservation, and a Tropical Extinction Symposium held at the Smithsonian Institution. Attending these events helped me learn more about issues of interest to other scientists that I

knew relatively little about beforehand, such as organic chemicals in drinking water sources. They also made me more aware of interdisciplinary research, for example the use of mathematics to treat leukemia patients. This type of research typifies what many federal agencies ideally wish to fund.

Although I really liked working in the AIBS Public Policy Office, some of the memories that I will cherish most about living in Washington occurred outside the office. First, there was the election of President Barack Obama. This would have been a significant moment wherever I resided in the country, but it was heightened by the fact that I was residing among and celebrating with District of Columbia residents. Even more exciting was being able to attend the inauguration ceremony on the national mall among millions of my fellow Americans. Despite the cold, this was a great day to be in our nation's capital! Of course, this time in history was also marked by a low point in the economy, which even affected a large, vibrant city like DC, where my landlords closed their retail store after 25 years of business. I will also cherish the memory of attending a hearing on the hill at which former Vice President Al Gore testified on global climate change, giving one of his trademark slideshows to a small audience.

The combination of a great place to work, many educational opportunities, and a memorable time in history set against a backdrop of the nation's capital- with its diverse neighborhoods, stately government buildings, and the 1st distinct autumn and winter that this intern had experienced in nearly 18 years- made for an experience that I believe was more than worthwhile. I feel that my time in DC has made me a more mature person, opened my eyes to the need for scientists in academia to be concerned with policy as well as educating the public concerning the value of our research, and given me a firmer grasp of the big picture of research funding and how projects could be tailored to fit the research needs that members of Congress understand. I very much appreciated this opportunity and would encourage the ASM to make this program available to graduate students in the future.