

Student Programs

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STUDENT PROGRAMS

ASM-AIBS PUBLIC POLICY REPORT

The following account was written by Josh Smith, the 2007 American Society of Mammalogists (ASM)—American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS) Public Policy Fellow. Mr. Smith completed his master's degree in wildlife and fisheries sciences at South Dakota State University in August 2007. He is currently pursuing several options to secure a Ph.D. project both in the United States and abroad. The following account describes a number of activities he participated in while in Washington, D.C.

I would first like to thank the American Society of Mammalogists (ASM) and the American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS) for offering the ASM-AIBS Public Policy Fellowship and say that I was pleased to be the recipient of this award. The opportunity to spend 3 months in Washington, D.C., and witness firsthand the legislative process gave me a new perspective on the effort that goes into crafting laws and the behind-the-scenes organization that takes place in moving agendas forward. By affording the opportunity to attend congressional hearings and briefings, and participate directly in the setup, research, and operation of coalition meetings, congressional briefings, and other forums, I was able to not only observe but also participate in the national dialogue taking place on many key issues.

I spent the 1st few weeks in Washington learning the ins and outs of policy-related research. I became adept at locating bills on government Web sites, and was introduced to a host of new media discussing science-related issues. The majority of my time was spent examining Web sites, magazines, and newspapers for issues of importance to AIBS members. I was immediately struck by how issues appeared to come and go. A subject that garnered widespread attention one day was quickly forgotten as a plethora of new topics arose. I gained a greater appreciation for those working to keep science-related issues in the national forefront.

As part of this internship, I was able to attend hearings on Capitol Hill covering a wide range of topics including climate change, international wildlife conservation, and the new energy bill. One bill that I followed with particular enthusiasm was the "Rare Canids and Rare Felids Act of 2007" introduced in the House Natural Resources Committee by Rep. Tom Udall (D-NM) and Rep. Henry Brown (R-SC). The bill would provide 5 million dollars per year for international research on some of the world's most endangered species. I was able to hear testimony from researchers from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). They spoke on the status of tigers and snow leopards in Asia, and wild dogs and Ethiopian wolves in Africa, as well as several other highly endangered species worldwide. It was intriguing to watch as they condensed years of research into 5-minute

testimonies before answering questions from subcommittee members. It highlighted the importance of researchers being able to summarize their findings in ways that are easily understandable to the general public as well as the scientific community. Following this bill through the subcommittee hearing and the markup process was my 1st real exposure to the legislative process (not to mention learning what a markup was). I began to realize how easy it is for bills to get passed through one step only to stall at the next. The need for electing officials that are passionate about vital issues and who will remain engaged as bills make their way through the numerous procedural stages quickly became evident.

In addition to attending meetings I wrote biweekly public policy reports for AIBS member organizations covering a host of science-related topics. These articles included such things as the International Union of Concerned Scientist's Red List, which lists the world's most endangered species, passage of new spending bills, issues related to climate change, and the Endangered Species Recovery Act of 2007 (S. 700). As the Senate Finance committee approved the Endangered Species Recovery Act of 2007, I had the opportunity to conduct an in-depth look at Congress's attempt over the last 15 years to reform the original Endangered Species Act. I spoke with members of the National Wildlife Federation and the president of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) about the history of the Endangered Species Act and questioned them on current provisions in the new bill. It was rewarding to hear both sides speak so favorably about the new provisions, and it was a testament to the kind of sound legislation that can be produced when both sides work together.

By Labor Day 2007 campaigning for the presidential primaries were already in full swing. I began working with AIBS staff on producing a "presidential cheat sheet"—a sheet that broke down each candidate's stance on issues such as climate change, the environment, and bio-related funding—as well as several other smaller projects. One of the projects involved a detailed look at the National Science Foundation's (NSF) BIO directorate. Specifically, I focused on funding rates of researchers applying for grants over the past 5 years, Congress's funding of NSF BIO over the same time period, as well as some of the more noteworthy breakthroughs that have occurred as a result of NSF funding. Part of this research will be used to create a "white sheet" that will be distributed to members of Congress and their staffers at future meetings.

Over the course of the internship I had the opportunity to meet and interact with a host of individuals. While attending hearings, briefings, and meetings, I met with members of the Ecological Society of America, Defenders of Wildlife, WWF, WCS, government officials from the United States Geological Survey (USGS), NSF personnel, and many others. I worked with AIBS on their annual USGS coalition meeting and an

Association of Ecosystem Research Centers (AERC) congressional briefing on biofuels and its effect on the environment. I was able to meet Reps. John Salazar (D-CO) and Ciro Rodriguez (D-TX) at the USGS coalition meeting as well as staff from several other representatives. At the AERC meeting, I heard talks from some of the nation's leading scientists on biofuels-related research. The talks covered a range of issues including the impacts of bioenergy crop cultivation on basic ecosystem services, including wildlife habitat, soil conservation, and water quality, in addition to the environmental and economic challenges associated with energy crops. In the process of attending similar talks and hearings, the use of wildlife as a way to draw in the audience began to stand out. I started to realize how uniquely positioned mammalian research is to bring many issues to the national forefront.

Aside from the work-related aspects, I partook in many of Washington's cultural offerings. In October I visited the solar decathlon, a competition in which teams from around the world displayed solar-powered houses. I heard Barack Obama speak at a rally just blocks from the AIBS office, took in a battery of Smithsonian and other museums, and joined a kickball league. My kickball teammates included high-ranking staffers of Representatives, researchers from Johns Hopkins University, lawyers, and individuals working for several nonprofit organizations. Our Sunday games and subsequent get-togethers facilitated numerous political and philosophical debates, allowed me to make new acquaintances, and provided an avenue to gain a more detailed understanding of the legislative process.

Since leaving Washington, I have completed a 5-month field season in Oregon working for the Oregon Department of Fish

and Wildlife out of the Pacific Northwest Research Station. This project was a 7-year study examining elk-calf survivorship in the Blue Mountains. We specifically looked at whether low recruitment in certain areas was the result of poor nutrition or depredation. Part of my position included collaring mountain lions in 2 study sites. Having worked on similar projects in the past, I felt I was better able to handle the controversial aspects associated with large carnivore issues, in part due to my preparation at AIBS.

After leaving Oregon, I returned to South Dakota where I was actively involved in the local political efforts for the June 3rd presidential primaries. As a precinct captain, I was in charge of a legislative district in the city of Sioux Falls, managing a team of 15 volunteers. I was fortunate to see both Democratic contenders speak in South Dakota, organized and led meetings, and participated in local "Get Out the Vote" efforts.

These opportunities, when coupled with what I learned during the internship, have solidified the direction I wish to take my career. The 3 months I spent in Washington bolstered my desire to combine wildlife biology and ecological sciences with public policy. I have started to look at wildlife research in the broader context of community development and public policy. I recognize that just conducting good science is not enough. Preservation of our natural resources will entail a combination of science and the dissemination of that information to the general public and our elected representatives. As I now search for a potential Ph.D. project, I feel more confident in my ability to bridge this gap and engender a more inclusive end product.