High School Interns from Montana to Massachusetts Bring Enthusiasm and Curiosity to Woods Hole Science Aquarium

Feeding fish and cleaning tanks, training harbor seals, leading beach collecting trips for the public, and helping children and adults learn about marine animals at the touch tanks have all been part of their daily routine. Nine high school students from Montana to Massachusetts spent the summer of 2009 volunteering at the Woods Hole Science Aquarium (WHSA), the nation's oldest public research display aquarium and part of NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center.

Ann Thompson from Charlo, Montana, traveled the greatest distance to attend the program and experienced Cape Cod for the first time. A May graduate of Charlo High School, Thompson grew up on the Flathead Indian Reservation and has only fished in streams and lakes. This fall, she will enter Humboldt State University in California, pursing an interest in fisheries science.

Drew McCabe of Falmouth, a junior at Cape Cod Academy, was the closest and perhaps most familiar with marine science. A SCUBA diver who fishes and snorkels and lives much of the summer on a sailboat with his family, he has taken marine-related classes in Woods Hole and intends to pursue a marine science career as a teacher or in research.

Despite the students' diverse backgrounds and educational experiences, all brought enthusiasm, curiosity and energy to the annual program, which began in its current form in 2002. They even started a blog about their daily activities, which can be found at: http://whaquarium.wordpress.com/

The interns, some here for two weeks and others for five weeks, all participated in the Careers in Marine Science Seminar July 27 to August 7. Several high school students stay for an additional one to two weeks after the program ends to help with animal husbandry and to serve as junior naturalists on collecting walks.

The career seminar students get training in marine animal husbandry and basic aquarist chores, hear presentations from scientists working in a variety of marine fields, go on collecting trips, visit other Woods Hole science institutions, and go on field trips to the New Bedford waterfront, Whaling Museum and Buttonwood Park Zoo and Nantucket's Maria Mitchell Association Aquarium.
The seminar is designed to give students an idea of what people working in Woods Hole do, and how different areas of science contribute to the larger effort to understand the marine world and to manage marine resources wisely. Jack Hildick-Smith of Sleepy Hollow, N.Y. found it a perfect fit for his interests. A junior at Horace Mann School in the Bronx, Hildick-Smith is a docent at the New York Aquarium on Coney Island and manages his school’s aquarium collections with a classmate. He has been interested in cephalopods, a class of animals that includes squids and octopods, since the third grade and raised squid this summer during the internship.

“The internship allowed me to use all my scientific, aquarium, learning and people skills and to be responsible for the care of more animals across a much wider range of species and environments,” he said. “I got to attend lectures and visit other research facilities in Woods Hole, one of the world centers for marine science. But the best part was meeting researchers who are doing what I am interested in.”

The high school students were kept busy during the day, and had opportunities to meet other students in Woods Hole who were participating in other summer education programs. College students from around the country also spent the summer in Woods Hole participating in the pilot Partnership Education Program (PEP), designed to promote diversity in the Woods Hole science community, and the Bradford E. Brown Student Internship Program, named for a retired NOAA Fisheries scientist who was a leader in recruiting young people into fishery science.

They also enjoyed many activities together at night and on weekends, from visiting the Barnstable County Fair to seeing a New England Revolutions game in Foxboro, to swimming in Grew’s Pond and experiencing a “Night at the Aquarium,” when they played games and slept in sleeping bags on the conference room floor.

“I really liked the hands-on activities, and it was much more laid back and relaxed than I expected,” said Elisha Garcia of Lakeville, Mass., a senior at Coyle Cassidy High School in Taunton, Mass. “It strengthened my interest in marine science, and especially working with sea turtles. I am going to look at colleges that offer strong marine science programs, and heard about some of them this summer. Running an aquarium and caring for marine animals is a lot more fun than I realized.”

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