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When I applied for a JrCOSTEP position, I never dreamed that I'd end up in Southeast Alaska. Upon my arrival to my duty station in Sitka, I realized that my internship would not only enhance my skills as an environmental health professional, but it would provide me with an opportunity to work with a variety of people in a setting that was heavily influenced by culture and tradition. My experience as a JrCOSTEP opened my eyes to real world problems that required me to become a more well-rounded environmental health professional with versatile skills and an open mind for all situations, cultures and locations.

During my first week of work, I realized that I was extremely blessed with the position that had been assigned to me. Not only did I have the chance to pass by a beautiful harbor and majestic eagles on the way to work, but I was immediately presented with activities that would both enhance and test my knowledge of the field. I was given the opportunity to complete food safety manager training and perform a food service facility survey, which required me to utilize skills that I had developed in my coursework at Western Carolina University. I also had the opportunity to board a taxi boat and travel to a nearby island to perform a survey for a juvenile rehabilitation center.

A few weeks later, I flew to Juneau with the quality improvement nurse and a safety and infection control officer to perform evaluations on a homeless clinic. Then, I had the opportunity to travel to the remote community of Angoon to perform similar evaluations on the clinic there. These trips helped me to gain experience in areas that were unfamiliar to me, while at the same time allowing me to see some of the most amazing settings and wildlife that Alaska has to offer. Whale, sea lion, eagle and blue heron sightings were common. Exposure to the customs and traditions in small native communities made me aware that professionals must familiarize themselves with the thoughts and beliefs of the population(s) that they serve in order to be the most effective in providing them with services.

The most cultural experience that I had while in the state of Alaska occurred in the small village of Kake. I was invited to the annual culture camp there, which not only provided me with the opportunity to help teach young children about hand hygiene, but allowed me to develop a better understanding of the values and teachings of the Tlingit tribe. I participated in a tribal dance and witnessed a native ceremony of dance and song. The counselors and children at the camp explained to me that respecting one's elders is one of the major teachings of the tribe, and that it was very important to pass down traditions, stories and lessons to every new generation. I also got to see my first Alaskan black bear during my stay there!

My next trip was to Prince of Wales Island, where I assisted my coworker with surveys at the senior center in Klawock and the waste disposal centers in Klawock and Hydaburg. The surveys at the waste centers opened my eyes to barriers that affect environmental health issues in Southeast Alaska, such as the lack of resources to properly dispose of hazardous waste and the limitations that prevent the smaller communities from recycling plastics, metals, paper and other recyclable goods. I recognized that education about environmental health concerns and resources for funding projects to improve the conditions in Southeast Alaska are two of the biggest needs in the area.



My last trip was to Angoon to perform Healthy Home surveys for the native elders in the community. We focused on problems such as poor ventilation, mold, moisture, indoor air quality, safety hazards, fire hazards, disabled/handicap accessibility problems, damage to the structural integrity of homes, and sanitation issues. We coordinated with an injury prevention specialist and a case management nurse to evaluate the needs of over twenty homes in order to prepare reports for each individual home. The reports will later serve as supportive documents for funding applications so that the environmental health and safety hazards in each home can be addressed and improved or corrected.

I spent my hours after work taking advantage of everything that the Inside Passage had to offer. I paid a visit to the Mendenhall Glacier in Juneau, saw deer along the highways on Prince of Wales Island, hiked nearly every trail in Sitka, fished for salmon in the open waters of Sitka Sound, and took the time to appreciate monuments and historical sites that gave tribute to the native and Russian influences in Alaska. I flew on small twin-engine planes and float planes to remote areas, attended folk and classical music concerts, ran a 5K race at midnight under a full moon and visited the waste center in Angoon to see a rather chubby bear devour leftovers. On more relaxing days, I took wilderness tours on boats or relaxed on the beaches of Japonski Island.

During my final week, I realized that Sitka had become more than a duty station for me. It was a home away from home, where I had made new friends. Those friends eventually became more like family members to me. The surroundings that I found myself in proved to not only be a challenge for my job assignments, but also an amazing place that I had grown attached to over the three months that I spent there. I feel blessed to have been chosen for this position, and I would gladly return to Alaska to work as an environmental health professional.