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East Central University
Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium
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During my two month internship at the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC), I worked as an Environmental Health Intern with Valerie Herrera and Andrew Atkinson. My primary work was to assist Andrew on Environmental Tours in various communities in southeast Alaska. During my stay, I visited the villages of Yakutat, Kake, Angoon, and various communities on Prince of Wales Island. Visiting these villages was definitely a memorable experience, as I had never been to anything like them! These communities typically had between 100 to 500 residents, and could only be reached by boat or bush plane. In fact, one village didn't have a runway; instead, we had to fly in via sea plane and land on the water!

Upon reaching the communities, Andrew and I would inspect the local landfill, SEARHC clinic, and senior centers. For me, the landfills were always the most interesting to inspect, primarily because there was almost always a bear or two present at the site. At landfills we would typically observe how the waste was managed (was it burned or buried regularly, was recycling available, were the metals and white goods separated, etc.) and observe the condition of the site (was there excessive windblown trash, was there a fence around the premises, were there signs indicating the landfill's hours of operation, etc.). With this information, Andrew and I could make recommendations to the community on changes that should be made to improve the safety of the landfill and its effectiveness. Some of the most common issues with the landfills were not being permitted and not having adequate fencing to keep out wildlife. In fact, we even witnessed a bear eating garbage right next to an operating excavator; the bear showed no fear of people largely due to this open landfill.

At clinics, Andrew and I would typically look for expired items, improper storage of medical equipment, and fire safety. At senior centers, we primarily focused on food safety. This could include kitchen cleanliness, proper food storage, expired food items, and damaged food preparation areas such as counters and stoves. Just as with the landfills, we would complete reports on how to further provide safety for their community's residents.



Inspecting rural community landfills was one of my duties while in the field.



A community clinic that we inspected in Kasaan on Prince of Wales Island.

Another project we worked on was mold inspections in U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) homes in Yakutat. From the 1970's to the 90's, hundreds of homes were built for Alaska Natives across southeast Alaska by HUD. However, these homes were designed for warm dry environments – not for the cold, wet environment found in Alaska. Because of this, these homes are beginning to mold and cause serious health issues to their residents. In Yakutat, Andrew and I inspected sixteen homes and wrote detailed reports as a third party. These reports included the location and extent of mold or water damage in the homes. This information was then sent to the tribe's headquarters to be used for applying to a grant to have the homes fixed at no cost to the homeowner. Before I had arrived in Sitka, Andrew had already visited several other villages to perform similar inspections.

In addition to this field work, I also assisted in creating Hazard and Vulnerability Assessments for communities in southeast Alaska. Valerie Herrera, who got me started on this project, needed someone who was unfamiliar with Alaska to determine the vulnerabilities of each community if a natural or manmade disaster were to occur. To complete this project, I read through each community's Hazard Mitigation Plan and Community Overview (provided by Alaska's Department of Commerce website), as well as the community's webpages to determine their expected hazards, their current level of planning in case of disaster, the number of policemen and firemen in the area, and history from previous disasters. From this, I could draw conclusions on which communities were most at risk. Additionally, I also was invited to attend a workshop at University of Alaska Southeast in Sitka that was designed to teach community officials how to properly manage their rural water systems. This has been an issue in most villages due to budget cuts, not many people paying their water bills, and little interest in the subject. The training was essentially how to effectively manage these major issues in these communities, without disrupting the accepted way of life. However, three communities had dropped out of the training due to other issues in their communities at the time, leaving only Hydaburg in attendance.

Overall, I had an amazing time in Sitka over the last few months. Not only did I get incredible experience as an Environmental Health Specialist, but I was also able to see places that never would have been possible. I also got the chance to go sea kayaking with kids as part of a safety assessment, got to go salmon fishing for the first time thanks to Andrew and his wife, and was able to take a few days off to go to Juneau with my mom who visited for a week. I know with this experience I am very well prepared for my future in environmental health, and am very grateful that I had this opportunity.