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Sarah Johnson: Finding the People and Places in the Polar Acronym Soup

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I chose my college courses by which ones had the best field trips. Biology and geology field work paired well with my outdoor and wilderness leadership roles, and a love for sharing and building community are a few of the factors that have led me to Arctic field studies.



I am an environmental educator, outreach professional, science communicator, outdoor trip leader, entrepreneur, and lover of the natural world in all its faces and phases. Developing professional development workshops for educators, collaborating with universities, managing national climate change curriculum projects, and teaching people of all ages is my life's work. I love teaching people how to become better observers of the natural world. Combining my love of field experiences with my science education expertise and my concern about the future of our planet's health, I have been fortunate to apply my skills and know-how to the Arctic science community.

A valued mentor in my life encouraged me to apply for [PolarTREC](#) a few years ago. I had never dreamed that I could apply my skills in science and education to places I had only ever seen in films and National Geographic magazines. Amazingly, I was selected and then paired with the [International Arctic Buoy Programme](#) (IABP). I have since spent over three years communicating Arctic science through various outreach projects virtually, in person, and while in the field (on the sea ice) visiting Arctic communities. These outreach projects have included the Arctic Buoy STEM program for Navy Sea Cadets, [Float Your Boat](#) program, media outreach (podcasts, radio, newspaper, etc.), middle and high school classroom visits, Girl Scout STEM programs, numerous community presentations, and integrating my Arctic experience into climate change education workshops I teach.



Initially, in my new polar education role, I needed to learn everything I could to understand the science of sea ice motion, ocean circulation, and Arctic buoys; yet I am also very interested and committed to learning the places, the systems and institutions, and the culture of where the science happens. Science happens with people in places; within a context of place, relationships, and culture. So, I began listening to KBRW Top of the World Radio in Utqiaġvik, Alaska; scouring the library (and inter-library loan program) for books about Iñupiaq people and the culture of the North Slope of Alaska; finding music and poetry from the region; learning about our team members; and of course scanning websites, videos, and research to understand the importance and 'so what' of the Arctic drifting buoys observing the ocean and sea ice.

With time I have also begun to try to understand the cryosphere acronym soup: IABP, ICE-PRP, ARCUS, IARPC, PEI, SIKU, PSC, APL-UW, USAPECS, UIC, NARL, BARC, NNA, PSECCO, NIC, ... These (and so many more) are organizations, collaborations, initiatives, long-standing influential projects, and more so people who work together to better understand the planetary systems, understand the many stakeholders and perspectives of the Arctic land and seascape, and aspire to move the needle forward in our collective understanding and continued and expanding stewardship of these systems. As a newcomer to the scene, often these acronyms feel like barriers to entering the conversation. Yet, if you're not afraid to ask (sometimes repeatedly), you can begin to piece the many entities of people and projects together.

Over the past three years, I have been tuning into virtual and in-person gatherings of polar science communities including Arctic STEM professionals, Arctic citizen and community science symposiums, live-stream events from the polar regions, American Geophysical Union conference sessions, and paying attention to announcements from many of the organizations listed above. This is helping me to piece together a sliver of the complexity of Arctic science and the political management of the Arctic. By showing up, listening, and contributing where I can, my understanding and relationship with the Arctic have increased tenfold.

And as with most things in life, everything comes back to relationships: with each other, with the landscape, with culture, and with ourselves. Prioritizing authentic relationship building with our science team, local experts in Utqiaġvik, Alaska, fellow polar educators, and immersing myself in learning about the culture of the place, has afforded me very meaningful experiences.

Specifically, fostering new relationships with the local experts and community leaders in Utqiaġvik has granted me a more authentic understanding of northern Alaska. Connecting with UIC-Science staff while on site, taking time to share community news and hunting stories while gearing up and preparing to get out in the field in the snow machine Quonset hut, and then staying connected throughout the year has expanded my worldview and been really fun to have a lens into a culture so distant from my own. Building friendships with the Utqiaġvik Girl Scout troop and its leaders has also given me a connection to people with shared values and spirit. And working with local school leaders bringing our science and passion for STEM to students has given me another path to learning more about the people in the community; you can learn a lot from local youth about how things really are.

Ultimately, through this authentic curiosity for culture, people, places, and the science observations we are there to complete, there is a widening of perspective, understanding, and community building. Arctic science does not get done by academics and researchers alone. These projects are long-lasting and ultimately successful due to strong authentic local relationships, community spirit and humor, campaign teamwork and leadership, and an ever-deepening understanding of the landscape as a whole.

Bio:

Sarah Johnson is a climate change environmental educator. As a freelancer she is focused on climate change, public lands, interdisciplinary watershed studies, geography, and teaching and learning through her business, Wild Rose Education. She designs and facilitates educator professional development workshops, public lands courses, Arctic STEM programs, and a multi-state regional climate change educator cohort. Sarah holds a BS in Biology with minor in Geology from Missouri State University, and MAEd in Natural Science and Environmental Education from Hamline University.

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Land acknowledgment:

The work of Wild Rose Education happens from Carbondale, Colorado in the Roaring Fork Watershed at the headwaters of the Colorado River. This is and always has been the sacred land of the Ute people. The Arctic science work Sarah is involved in happens in collaboration with the Iñupiat people in Utqiaġvik, Alaska.



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