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## Students brave cold for research expedition to Alaska

February 20, 2013

On her blog, St. Mark Catholic School science teacher Elizabeth Eubanks, 48, gives a shout-out to Rodgers and Hammerstein, as she once again climbs every mountain and fords every stream in her PolarTrec quest.

PolarTrec, (Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating), an educational research organization sponsored by the National Science Foundation brings K-12 teachers to the polar regions to participate in hands-on field research.

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Eubanks and her students - three eighth-graders, two seventh-graders and two parents - are just back from a week-long research expedition to Alaska.

"Having my students present at an international professional science conference is above and beyond any experience that I can offer them as a science teacher," Eubanks said. "The students were thrilled to be there and thrilled to meet real live working scientists."

A PolarTrec veteran, Eubanks returned in October from Costa Rica with Steve Oberbauer, a professor of biological sciences at FIU and was in Barrow, Alaska in 2008 at the Barrow Arctic Science Consortium with Oberbauer studying the Arctic tundra.

This time, they arrived at the Alaska Marine Science Symposium in Anchorage, where it was 16 degrees Fahrenheit and snowing when they landed.

On this expedition the students learned about the Arctic ecosystem, the effects of human interaction, climate change, oceanography, lower tropic levels and its impact on marine life, native fish habitats, indigenous Arctic birds and Eubanks' favorite, seabirds and mammals.

At the Alaska Sea Life Aquarium, they learned about polar bear populations, seal migration, the changing eco-systems, Alaska's climate change, how to measure the whiskers on seals, saw American Robin Torus Migratorius and puffins swimming in their natural habitat and learned that baby walrus are need cuddling.

"The conference was really interesting. I enjoyed the overall conference experience and meeting the scientists," said student Anna Hayden, 14, an eighth-grader whose mother, Frances, accompanied the group.

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Hayden, who also went to last year's Ocean Sciences Meeting in Salt Lake City with Eubanks, said, "My favorite thing was visiting the Sea Life Aquarium and having a personal behind-the-scenes tour. We saw sea otters and sea lions and learned that polar bears are affected by the sea ice loss and climate change."

In fact she was so taken with the wildlife, Hayden wants to work with animals in the future.

A straight A student, who Eubanks calls "bright, brave, independent, brilliant and a complete pleasure to be around," loves language arts and science, Hayden said, "because of Mrs. Eubanks. She's a really good teacher and has an interesting way of teaching."

One of the main projects Eubanks assigned her students was to interview scientists and to create posters detailing what they've learned.

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One of their posters was titled, "The Benefits of being a SoTRE, students of a teacher researcher experiences."

"The best part of the trip for me is seeing my students learning, enjoying themselves and being turned on to science and scientists," Eubanks said.

She was pleased with Hayden's curiosity and desire to learn more about the issues facing the Arctic.

"I am very impressed by Anna's questions. She really wants to learn and understand what the scientists are saying. Many times we have to look up words or acronyms together. One word that Anna looked up was anthropogenic - the impact that humans have on the earth," Eubanks said.

Frances Hayden, Anna's mother said, "It is an incredibly valuable experience for Anna and all the students. They are exposed to researchers, university professors, grad students and scientists who share their knowledge, experiences and life stories with the students."

George Divoky, an ornithologist with the Friends of Cooper Island research institute in Seattle, who spends up to three months alone on a deserted ice shelf east of Barrow for research purposes, was one of the scientists at the symposium.

For the past 30 years Divoky has made it his life's work to study the Black Guillemots of Cooper Island, an indigenous Arctic species of birds on a remote barrier island in northern Alaska.

A scientist on the research frontiers of climate change, arctic adaptations and anthropogenic influences on high latitude species, Divoky has been featured in the *New York Times Magazine*, NPR, ABC News Nightline and on PBS with Alan Alda.

"When I teach students that due to the fact that the sea ice is retreating, and the birds can no longer feed off the fish under the sea ice but need to fly 25 miles to obtain food for their young, instead of their normal 2 miles, this is something students can relate to."

"I give them age appropriate information, and want to relay an appreciation that as climate changes occur, so will our way of life," Divoky said. "It's important to educate our youth to these changes and how these changes affect different species."

For Divoky, who really only wanted to study birds, but got drawn into climate change as an outgrowth of his research, "This is a story about how climate change can disrupt a system that we've depended upon for eons. The melting Arctic snow and ice have affected indigenous Arctic species."

But he said species adapt and so can we.

"All in all, I'm hopeful about the outcome," Divoky said.

What's next for Eubanks and her students? The 2014 Ocean Science Meeting in Honolulu.

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