UA Employee Explores the Arctic with National Geographic

Water Resources Research Center
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While many UA employees spent the summer hunkered down in air-conditioned offices, one was able to escape the heat in a big way.

Betsy Wilkening, program coordinator for the UA's **Arizona Project WET** [1], recently returned to Tucson from a 15-day expedition through Greenland and Nunavut in the Canadian High Arctic aboard the ship National Geographic Explorer.

Project WET, or Water Education for Teachers, is housed at the UA **Water Resources Research Center** [2] in the **College of Agriculture and Life Sciences** [3]. The program works to develop water stewardship and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) literacy through K-12 teacher development and direct student outreach.

"The polar regions have captivated me for a while now, and I've been really involved with the science and education surrounding them," Wilkening said. "This trip gave me the opportunity to experience the isolated beauty and fragility of the Arctic, and increased my respect for the resilience of the wildlife and the people who call it home."

Wilkening's journey to the frozen north was part of the National Geographic/Lindblad Expeditions' Grosvenor Teacher Fellow Program, which sends a select few exemplary U.S. educators along on Arctic expeditions to promote geo-literacy and ocean stewardship among their fellow travelers, and bring new activities back to their classrooms and communities.

After a rigorous selection process in which only 14 teachers were chosen to participate in seven different Arctic voyages, Wilkening – a UA alumna with a background in chemical and systems engineering – represented Project WET on the Canadian Arctic expedition.

"We saw 61 polar bears," Wilkening said. "They were heavily concentrated in patches of sea ice around Baffin and Devon islands. These included mothers with cubs, a male with a freshly killed seal, and others on the hunt. Some bears perched on cliff faces seemed to be resting while waiting for the sea ice to return."

Other wildlife sightings included seals and birds, as well as bowhead, fin, humpback and killer whales. Wilkening said her favorite day of the expedition was when her group watched small groups of narwhals, another type of whale, in the shallow water off the shorelines around Icy Arm, where glaciers fed into the bay.

"It was a personal goal of mine to see narwhals," she said.

Aboard the Explorer, Wilkening found that the UA was well-represented among the guests and crew. Fellow Wildcat alumni Dennis Cornejo, Michael Nolan, Chuck Pease and William McClements joined Wilkening on the late-summer Arctic quest.

Wilkening said each day of her journey presented amazing learning opportunities like viewing wildlife, hiking on the tundra, traveling through a variety of sea ices, listening in on lectures from on-board experts – including Cornejo and Nolan, visiting with staff, naturalists, historians and guests, and taking in tours and presentations in Inuit communities.

"I spent many early mornings on the bridge learning from the ship's captain, first officer and ice expert officer, as well as (Lindblad Expeditions founder) Sven Linblad, who offers so much support to the Teacher-Fellow program," Wilkening said.

Now back in the desert heat, Wilkening said she is looking forward to creating lessons with teachers in Arizona for both the classroom and the field based on her Arctic experiences, and contributing globally with the **Polar Educators International** [4] organization, an international professional network for people who educate in, for or about the polar regions. Wilkening serves as a council member and Web designer for that organization.

To read more about Wilkening's polar expedition, check out her **blog** [5].

Links
[1] http://cals.arizona.edu/arizonawet/ [2] https://wrrc.arizona.edu/ [3] http://cals.arizona.edu/ [4] http://www.arcus.org/witness-the-arctic/2012/3/article/19461 [5] http://www.polartrec.com/expeditions/ocean-atmosphere-sea-ice-and-snowpack-interactions/journals