Winter 2024

NWAC Snow School Intern

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Western Washington University

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Internship Title: Northwest Avalanche Center Snow School
Organization Worked For: Northwest Avalanche Center, Mt Baker Ski Area
Student Name: Sorelle Thompson
Internship Dates: 2/22/24 3/31/24
Faculty Advisor Name: Froylán Sifuentes
Department: ESCI

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STUDENT SIGNATURE: 
DATE: 4/15/24
Sorelle Thompson
ESCI 498B (2 credits)
Advisor: Froylán Sifuentes

The Mt. Baker Snow School internship opportunity with Western Washington University and the Northwest Avalanche Center (NWAC) allows students to help educate middle schoolers in the Skagit and Whatcom school districts on snow science. Every Friday in March, I supported snow professionals and biologists by teaching kids about snowpack analysis, snow algae sampling, snow water equivalency, snow crystal observations, etc. The internship is also coupled with NWAC program outreach to help educate the public on recreating outside responsibly. The program outreach was two weekend days in March that consisted of setting up an NWAC tent and reaching out to backcountry recreationists on the hazards of avalanches and how to find the daily avalanche forecasts.

Before starting the internship, I had the intention to better understand if youth education was a possible career path for me after I graduate. This internship allowed me to see biologists and snow professionals teach snow science and allowed me to do it myself. Each day that I was on the mountain, I worked with another intern to get a group of kids off the bus, into snow clothes, up to the snow stations, and back down to the bus. Once we got a group of students, we would assess what snow clothes they needed and get them outfitted. After getting clothes and boots for most students, we would demonstrate how to put on snowshoes and help the students put on theirs. After everyone had snowshoes, we would give a safety talk. The safety talk was to be sure every student knew about staying alert for fast-moving snowmobiles, skiers, and large equipment, and to stay away from tree wells. Our group would then walk up to the snow stations, where students would rotate and learn about different topics. I would ensure students were paying attention when the teachers were teaching, and I would help with tasks. I would get to the self-guided station, I would give lessons on snow crystals, asking students why they looked a certain way and if the shape determines snow quality. I would also teach students about slopes on mountains and how they affect avalanches by asking the students to build mountains out of the snow. After rotating through the four stations, we would walk the students back to the lodge. We made sure they returned borrowed gear and let them get lunch. Interns would put away gear and
equipment, while students got onto the bus. Overall, this internship taught me how to engage students with snow science. Which could be challenging when they are in a fun environment but allowing them some fun with lessons was very rewarding. It also helped teach me how to explain environmentally complex questions more simply, so young students could understand.

The second part of the internship was doing program outreach for NWAC at the wild goose trailhead at Mt. Baker. The outreach was very simple and just consisted of reaching out to passing by backcountry recreationalists and letting them know about the daily avalanche forecast and that they should recreate at their own risk and ability. I would ask people if they have heard of NWAC and see if they knew about the avalanche forecast for the day. If they did not, I would let them know what to watch out for and what level of danger was forecasted. Outreach helped me understand how best to reach out to adults whether they knew about the forecast or not. It was great to educate people who didn’t know about avalanche forecast for their safety, so they understood their environment better.

After completing this internship, I walked away with a better understanding of how to teach middle school-aged students about science and how to talk to adults about environmental hazards. Overall, this was a pretty short internship, but it showed me how rewarding it was to teach others about the environment. I wanted to do this internship to see if education was a possible career path. I would say yes, it is after doing this internship, but I do not think it will be in snow science. I learned a lot about snow science, and I realized how connected it is to other environmental fields. Currently, I am more focused on freshwater and stream ecology, and I would be more interested in teaching in that field. Although I gained a wider knowledge of how snowmelt and glaciers feed into our watershed and
play a role in summer water levels. I am definitely interested in youth education, maybe not in snow science, but the internship increased my interest in education and outdoor programs for kids.

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