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My experiences as a Connecticut Sea Grant Knauss Marine Policy Fellow

by Laura Rear

When I was accepted as a Knauss Sea Grant Marine Policy Fellow in June 2002, I was exhilarated. I was going to get the chance to spend a year of my career working for the federal government in Washington, DC. It was not until five months later in November that I would come to DC for a week to interview and select the office I would be working in for the next year. Placement week, as the week in November is called, is a whirlwind of activity. There were 32 Fellows, 10 on the Legislative side and 22 on the Executive. I was chosen for the Executive Branch. We each had 12-16 interviews in a span of three days, mostly at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), but also at the Environmental Protection Agency, Oceanographer of the Navy, National Science Foundation, and Department of State. After the interviews, the offices rank their top picks, and then the Fellows decide where they want to work.

At the end of the week I had accepted a position at the NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration (OE). The office, under the direction of Capt. Craig McLean, was created in 2000 by an executive order requiring that the physical, biological, chemical and archaeological aspects of the ocean be explored, mapped and documented.

At OE I would work with the staff marine archaeologist, LTJG Jeremy Weirich, on policy issues related to submerged cultural resources. I was excited because it was a chance to learn something new. After finishing my master's degree in Oceanography at the University of Connecticut in December, I packed my belongings and moved south to the nation's capital.

One of my first tasks was to attend Underwater International in New Orleans to represent OE at their information booth and to take notes at the OE session held on Remotely Operated Vehicles (ROVs). It was there that I ran into Peter

Auster, Science Director for the Connecticut National Undersea Research Center (NURC), who would head out to sea with me later in the year to explore seamounts in the mid-Atlantic. That conference was the first of many that I would attend on behalf of Ocean Exploration. I also had the opportunity to participate in the National Science Teachers Association meeting in Philadelphia, where I met Diana Payne, Connecticut Sea Grant Educator, who would also sail with Peter and me later in the year.

OE funds scientists through a competitive proposal process to conduct exploratory research. A handful of the expeditions each year are documented in detail on the OE web site, <<http://www.oceanexplorer.noaa.gov>>.

When one of these missions arises, a staff member from OE is on board to cover the research cruise, working closely with the scientists, teachers and crew members on board to properly relay daily logs and photos in near real-time to shore. I was the Web Coordinator for the Mountains in the Sea cruise, and enjoyed the opportunity to work closely with several familiar faces from the University of Connecticut National Undersea Research Center and Connecticut Sea Grant. This expedition was extremely successful as all seven dives aboard the *Deep Submergence Vehicle Alvin* were completed, covering 29 hours of bottom time. A few new species of deep-sea corals were discovered, and at least one new species of cumacean (a small crustacean) was found.

During this research cruise, I was offered a moment to sit inside the *Alvin*. At last I knew what it was like to sit inside the tiny submersible that so many famous oceanographers used to visit the bottom of the ocean. Of course I could still only imagine what the deep abyss looked like, as *Alvin* was still in the hangar when I was given this chance to see inside the famed "creature"!

Speaking of *Alvin*, as the Marine

Archaeological Program Assistant, I was fortunate enough to head out to sea to the site of the *RMS Titanic* in June 2003 with several marine archaeologists. The *Titanic* remains were first found by Dr. Robert Ballard in 1985, using towed side scan sonar and cameras. In 1986 Ballard returned to the site with Alvin to document the state of the wrecked ocean liner. As per the Guidelines for Research, Exploration and Salvage of *RMS Titanic*, issued under the authority of the *RMS Titanic Maritime Act of 1986*, NOAA has a vested interest in the appropriate treatment and preservation of the *Titanic* wreck site.

The 2003 expedition to *Titanic* did not make use of Alvin; instead the Russian research vessel *Akademik Mstislav Keldysh* with its twin submersibles *Mir I* and *Mir II* was the research platform. CAPT McLean and LTJG Weirich, from OE; Dr. George Bass from the Institute of Nautical Archaeology at Texas A&M; Larry Murphy, Chief of the Submerged Resources Center, National Park Service; and microbiologists Dr. Roy Cullimore and Lori Johnston, Droycon Bioconcepts, Inc., were on board to

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Laura Rear, a 2003 Knauss Sea Grant Marine Policy Fellow from Connecticut, pictured in front of DSV *Alvin*.

Image courtesy of NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration.

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study the present state and offer archaeological insight for preserving *Titanic*. I was in charge of the logistics and managing metadata for this cruise. The good fortune of meeting the “father of maritime archaeology”, Dr. Bass, and discussing archaeological oceanography with him was absolutely priceless!

The last research cruise that I participated in during the year was the bio-prospecting expedition in the Gulf of Mexico, with researchers from the



Sea Grant Knauss Marine Policy Fellow (CT) Laura Rear hovers over the *Aquarius* in the Florida Keys.

Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution (Florida). This expedition marked the first time that NOAA OE used an industry ROV (Sonsub, Inc.) for exploratory research purposes. During this expedition I was in charge of managing the metadata in the OE database. This task included gathering weather information from the ship, recording the samples collected with the ROV, logging how they are stored, keeping track of the times that the ROV was in the water as well as what personnel were on shift. The expedition logged 22 ROV dives with over 80 hours of bottom time. Twelve sites were fully documented with 155 samples collected and catalogued.

When I was not out at sea, I worked on Memoranda of Understanding between NOAA and several State Historic Preservation Officers and Archaeologists. I had to work closely with the NOAA lawyers and the States in order to perfect the document. The document is a way of establishing a relationship between NOAA and the States helping them preserve their cultural maritime resources.

The NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration dedicates 10 per cent of its budget to education and outreach. As part of OE’s outreach program, a partnership was created with the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. Every year six girls get the chance of a lifetime to dive 50 feet underwater into the world’s only underwater laboratory, the *Aquarius*, owned and operated by the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, National Undersea Research Center. The scouts spend a week learning about ocean exploration and marine science, via a suite of activities centered on the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. I was in charge of planning and supervising the 2003 event, a pleasure for a 21-year member of the Girl Scout movement. One of the most amazing experiences of the week was watching the six girls become educated about how to conserve and protect our coral reef

resources, which are constantly under threat due to human contamination. This event helped inform me of the plight of the coral reef as well. This was the first time I had ever gotten a look at the reefs close-up. I learned to snorkel about 24 hours before the girls arrived and quickly appreciated every blue, red, orange, yellow and purple hue I encountered.

During one year at NOAA, I was able to get my feet wet, literally, and learn about how marine policy affects every researcher. I was given the opportunity to step out of academia and see where the policy is developed that allows researchers to conduct their science.

There are many issues facing the oceanographic community that will arise within the next few years and I am glad I got the chance to be a part of it. I am now working for the NOAA Center for Operational Oceanographic Products and plan to use the knowledge that I gained as a Knauss Fellow to further the mission of NOAA as we strive to manage, preserve and protect coastal and marine resources and begin to understand and predict changes in the Earth’s environment.



Ghost ship. Bow of the *Titanic*, as observed from a camera mounted on the *Mir* submersible. Image courtesy NOAA Ocean Exploration.

About the Author:
LAURA REAR is an Oceanographer at the NOAA Center for Operational Oceanographic Products and Services in Silver Spring, Maryland. In addition to having been a Sea Grant Knauss Marine Policy Fellow, she earned her masters degree from the UCONN Department of Marine Sciences in 2002.