As ASP Postdocs we are encouraged to engage in career development activities, in addition to furthering our research skills. So when I saw an advertisement for a three-month science and technology policy fellowship in Washington DC, I knew that that would be a great way to explore an entirely different world of career paths and to gain a different view on science and its relation to policy. My application for the fellowship was successful, and ASP granted me a leave of absence for the duration of the fellowship, allowing me to work in Washington DC from mid January to mid April as a Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Fellow at the National Academies. I was placed in the Polar Research Board (PRB), but also helped out in the Board for Atmospheric Sciences and Climate (BASC), as these two boards share some of their staff and work closely together. Given that I worked on Arctic climate research during my time as a PhD student and as a Postdoc, both boards were a perfect fit and the whole fellowship has been a great experience. I really learned a lot during these three months - let me summarize some of the most important points:

- The other fellows I met during the fellowship (there were 21 of us) were amazing, and it was great to share the experience with them. We all came from different science backgrounds, but we all shared an interest in how science can be used for policy, and we were all looking for a way to use our training to make a positive impact in some way – be it as an academic scientist, as a scientist working in a government agency, at an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization), in industry, or as an educator. These shared interests allowed for fun discussions, and I think we all learned a lot from each other.

- There are many people with science PhDs in Washington DC, working in jobs I didn’t know much about before coming here. Be it as program managers at funding agencies (e.g., NSF, DOE, NOAA, NASA), as program officers at the National Academies, as staffers for senators in specialized committees, as scientists and managers at large or small NGOs (e.g., the Union for Concerned Scientists, AAAS, the Global Adaptation Institute), as editors for Science, in the executive branch of government (e.g., State department, EPA), and probably in other roles at places I still don’t know about. Talking to people in several of these jobs gave me a better understanding of what they do and how scientists are making an impact outside the academic research environment.

- The government is very accessible to the public – everyone can get into the Senate and House office buildings, the Capitol, and the Supreme Court, just by showing up and going through a metal detector. You don’t even need an ID or a reason to be there. To observe the Senate and House business from the galleries you need tickets, but they are easily obtained from the staff of Representatives or Senators. The White House is a bit harder to get into, but even that is free, you only need to apply for a visit...
Three Months in DC (continued)

several months in advance through the staff of a Representative or Senator, with your ID number and SSN so that the Secret Service can clear you. Overall it was really quite impressive how accessible the government is for the public, and I very much enjoyed attending hearings and observing the working of the Senate and House as well as visiting the Supreme Court, the Capitol, and the White House. Observing the government like this really left a lasting impression and is a great way to learn more about the US government, whether you are from the US or not.

- The study process at the National Academies is very interesting – all of the reports are written by volunteers that serve on committees, with help from a few staff members that guide the committee selection process, keep the project on task and within budget, and help to produce one consistent report from the contributions of different committee members. The committees are made up of experts like scientists, engineers, lawyers, educators, and policy makers, and they often bring together people from different fields that do not normally interact. The biggest surprise was probably that the National Academies are essentially a soft-money institution, bringing in money through grants for reports. The sponsors of the reports, sometimes mandated by Congress, don’t get to see the report until it is finished and have no say in what is in the report – that is entirely up to the committee, which evaluates the existing science and bases recommendations on a consensus option. As studies typically take between 12 and 24 months to complete, a three-month fellowship is too short to observe a study from start to finish. But by being involved in several studies I got to help out at different stages of the report process in PRB and BASC, and I very much enjoyed the experience. Finally, I found out that there are even more acronyms in Washington DC than at NCAR!

- If you are interested in learning more about the National Academies, about science policy, and/or about career paths outside academia in a science-policy-related area, I highly recommend this fellowship (www7.nationalacademies.org/policyfellows/). It really is what you make of it, and within the group of the winter 2012 fellows we all had somewhat different experiences, depending on what we wanted to learn and where we were hoping to go next. The next application deadline is October 1st 2012, and I’ll be happy to answer any questions you may have (ajahn@ucar.edu).

As I’ll be leaving ASP, but not NCAR, in early May I also want to take this opportunity to say thanks for a great experience in ASP, which is another amazing fellowship. It allowed me to meet many great people at NCAR and gave me the freedom to set my own goals and to gain experience in research, teaching, and now policy. I could not have wished for more, and I sincerely hope that ASP will be able to offer this great opportunity to many more postdocs in the future. I think that just like the Christine Mirzayan fellowship, the ASP postdoctoral fellowship is really what you make of it, but it offers all the right things to allow you to make it into something great.

Spring Thompson Lecture Series with Dr. Stephanie Pfirman

Dr. Stephanie Pfirman will be at NCAR from May 16-18th for the 2012 Spring Thompson Lecture Series. During her visit, she will give two seminars, meet one on-one with postdocs, participate in both scientific and career roundtable discussions, and join the postdocs for a potluck.

Stephanie Pfirman is a Professor of Environmental Science at Barnard College and the Chair of Barnard’s Department of Environmental Science. In addition, she is an Adjunct Research Scientist with the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University. Prior to joining Barnard, Stephanie Pfirman was a senior scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund and co-developer of the exhibition, “Global Warming: Understanding the Forecast,” produced jointly with the American Museum of Natural History. She was awarded a Ph.D. in Oceanography and Oceanographic Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology/Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution Joint Program. Her research is focused on the Arctic, in particular the dynamics of Arctic sea ice and on pollutant transport in the Arctic, as well as on the effect of Arctic climate change on polar bears. She has a strong commitment to the development of women scientists and to interdisciplinary research, and has published on these subjects in addition to her publications on Arctic topics.

Dr. Pfirman will be giving two lectures: A general interest lecture entitled “Managing Arctic Sea Ice” on May 16th at Foothills Laboratory and an accessible scientific lecture entitled “The Last Arctic Sea Ice Refuge” on May 17th at the Mesa Laboratory.

Don’t miss this opportunity! For more details, please see www.asp.ucar