

Working at the Kenai Refuge is more than a job

by Macey Hoffman



Ranger Macey teaches summer campers about the impacts of pollution to waterways on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

The annual rush of tourists and new explorers coincides with summer days when the sun never really disappears. So when I showed up in Alaska in the middle of last winter's dark people frequently asked, "What brought you here?" To this I answered, "Well, to see the last Blockbuster in America of course!"

The even more exciting reason was that I got a nine-month internship through the Student Conservation Association at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. My official title is Environmental Education/Visitor Services intern but when I visit schools,

"Ranger Macey" is on my nametag. I get to hike trails during work hours, perform raps about animal scat, get kids excited about nature, and learn something new every day.

At the Refuge, I'm surrounded by some of the most environmentally knowledgeable people, who constantly inspire me and make me more certain of, and excited about, the career path I am on. Everyone has ended up here for unique and beautiful reasons, intentional or not. I decided to ask some staff what brought them here, why the Refuge is important to

them, and why they stayed. One thing was clear—you fall in love with this place fast.

“The Refuge was my backyard and I didn’t even know this job existed. This position has given me a new appreciation for the place I grew up in” said Donna Handley, Administrative Technician. Feeling a strong connection to the conservation goals the Refuge holds, she states, “You don’t just work here, it becomes a part of you,” something I can already attest to. Entomologist Matt Browser reflected on the Seven Lakes Trail being his first date location with his now wife. He speaks to the value of the recreation the Refuge provides, as well as the “beautiful landscape.” We live and work in the kind of place people dream about visiting; the gratitude is daily.

For Ranger Leah Eskelin, it was love at first site. She came to the Refuge as part of a volunteer trip during college. Alaska had always been a fairytale idea for her, and then it became a goal. Not only has the Refuge stolen her heart, but the community of the Kenai Peninsula as well. “The community was attractive; people take care of each other around here.” I smile as I recall her having me over for family dinner to try my first moose meal in the winter, agreeing there are so many kind people.

Leah also said “I have stayed because my job protects the lifestyle that I was attracted to in the beginning. Other land is being turned into subdivisions and we get to protect this landscape that we all love.” She appreciates the endless outdoor activities, breathtaking sights, opportunities for harvesting food for the fridge, and general well-being that comes along with a dose of nature.

Even more, education and constant learning are bonuses for all of the Refuge divisions. “We are educating the public which is crucial for conserving, but even I am learning constantly, which makes my position even more enjoyable,” said Debbie Perez, Refuge Clerk.

I found many themes while engaging staff during

these reflective conversations. The people who work at the Refuge love nature. They want to encourage a lifestyle that understands our environment and lives to preserve it. They find purpose and passion in coming into work every day, earning their titles as environmental stewards.

The people who I work with have taught me that if I love the mountains, trees and rivers, it’s so important to connect others with nature because when you love something, you’ll take care of it. One of my favorite quotes by Baba Dioum, “In the end we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught.” I specifically enjoy working with kids (which is where my position is focused) because it is extremely refreshing to experience people so excited about learning, exploring what’s around them, and discovering themselves and their interests.

The Refuge is important to me because the role that nature plays in my life is big one—we’re in a pretty serious relationship. Though going to Blockbuster and renting too many seasons of Greys Anatomy is tempting (and has happened before), I cannot think of an instance I regretted my time in nature. The wilderness makes me wonder, question, and feel beautifully lost, but it also brings me clarity and peace like nothing else does. Though nature is more complex and bigger than I can comprehend, it also has a way of reminding me to enjoy the simple things. These are all thoughts I believe everyone deserves, and need to benefit from. Whether the Kenai Refuge was on a to-do list or stumbled upon, the staff behind the Refuge come to work thankful and determined to protect and conserve for generations to come, and these feelings are pretty contagious.

Macey Hoffman has been a Student Conservation Association intern at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since February. You can find more information about the refuge at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.