

By Alyssa R. Frederick

From abalone to advocacy

Three months ago, as I stood on the edge of the National Mall in Washington, D.C., I allowed myself a few moments to appreciate what I was about to do. With a few deep breaths, I reminded myself that I was probably facing an uphill battle; took one last look at the Capitol; and, with three other graduate students, began a whirlwind tour of 12 congressional offices to push for policies to address climate change.

A year ago, I would have laughed at the suggestion that I meet with my elected representatives, whose names I certainly could not have provided. My academic goals were focused and familiar: Finish my Ph.D. studying abalone disease, do a postdoc, and become a professor at a research-intensive university. I was exploring climate change advocacy through a pilot program for graduate students, which involved seminars and a summer internship, but I considered this “extra,” not a core part of my work.

After the upheaval in U.S. politics that unfolded last year, and which continues to develop, it became obvious to me that I needed to become a stronger advocate. So, when the climate advocacy program I was involved in offered funding for an extra project shortly after the presidential election, I decided it was time to step up. A number of my Ph.D. student colleagues study climate change in some way, so I proposed that we take a trip to Washington, D.C., to meet with policymakers and climate experts. Three students signed on immediately, and my dean contributed additional support once he learned of the trip.

After a 2-month whirlwind of planning, the four of us boarded a plane with our pitches memorized. One of our first meetings—which was also one of our best—was with a congressional staffer from a suburban district in Pennsylvania, where Lyme disease is widespread. My colleague who studied tick-borne diseases explained how climate change will increase the prevalence of Lyme disease in the congressperson’s district. The staffer told us that this was exactly the kind of science he could use to help shape policies.

The meetings didn’t all go as well as that one. In one case, we advocated for a climate plan that, it turned out, the congressperson was already firmly against because of its economic implications, which made for a relatively unproductive meeting. Nonetheless, it served as a useful



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learning experience. We adjusted our approach for the rest of our meetings and suggested various policy proposals to address climate change, without picking favorites; framed ourselves as experts in science, not policy; and urged action on any plans that addressed carbon emissions and could receive bipartisan support. We saw firsthand that we can be more effective if we talk with—rather than at—others, recognize our weaknesses along with our strengths, and seek more advice than we provide. I know that our visits didn’t singlehandedly turn around the government’s climate change policies, but I’m glad to be doing my part to advocate for a cause I deeply believe in.

My experience in Washington, D.C., has also radically changed my career plans. Before, I was a biologist who did small-scale community outreach, such as visiting high school classes. Now, I see outreach and advocacy as the focus of my research and career. I am refocusing my Ph.D. research toward studying how animals respond to environmental change and how this knowledge can help abalone farmers. When I graduate, I plan to focus my research in areas such as how diseases and temperature change might affect global abalone fisheries, which will help fisheries and conservation managers create better, more sustainable policies.

Last November, I felt defeated—like science didn’t matter anymore and working on climate change resiliency was a lost cause. Now, I feel more energized than ever to fight for it. When I share my experience with other graduate students, they often lament that they don’t have time to engage outside the lab. My response is simple: Find the time. The planet is worth it. ■

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