

Fundamentals of Fieldwork: Ticks, Ships, and the Essentials of Experience

Alex Choo,¹ Jacob Gerke,² Victoria Sellers,³ and Maha Syed⁴

¹Illinois State University, ²Eastern Kentucky University, ³East Carolina University, ⁴University of Georgia

Through the Summer Program in Environmental Health (SUPEH) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) we four environmental health majors from EHAC^a-accredited university programs learned from working professionals, field trips, and activities about environmental health practice. Our internship showed us how a challenging, well-rounded internship can influence the professional growth and future career goals of future environmental health practitioners. The summer was uniquely special because we were given substantial opportunities to get our hands dirty in the field. As environmental health students, we were able to apply our classroom knowledge in the real world.

One week into our summer 2011 internship, Alex, Victoria, and Maha traveled to Arizona to aid in Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF) prevention. Going door to door on the White Mountain Apache Tribe and San Carlos Apache Reservations, we helped health departments and teams from CDC's Division of Vector Borne Diseases spread awareness and prevent the spread of RMSF, which is transmitted by ticks. Spreading pesticides, collaring dogs, distributing information, and communicating with the residents were not only amazing learning opportunities about environmental health, but also truly rewarding ones because we were aiding in disease prevention and improving the quality of health within these communities.

"We took away from the Arizona RMSF trip the sense that we assisted these communities while improving our skills as future environmental health professionals. The most important thing we learned in Arizona: teamwork, with a huge emphasis placed on communication—something every environmental health official should possess." –Victoria Sellers

Not too long after, Jacob and Maha packed up and headed off to Juneau, Alaska, to aid the Vessel Sanitation Program (VSP) in cruise ship inspections. While in Juneau, we developed our inspection skills and increase our knowledge by inspecting four different cruise ships and shadowing inspectors as they inspected both the technical and medical aspects of each ship. Technical inspections involved examining recreational waters, potable water systems, and integrated pest management systems. The medical inspections included comprehensive evaluations of food preparation areas and meeting with ship physicians to review medical records.

^aEHAC: The National Environmental Health Science & Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) develops and applies accreditation guidelines for institutions of higher education that wish to ensure premium quality education and training of environmental health science and protection practitioners.

“As a student strongly interested in food safety, the VSP field experience allowed me to apply all of the concepts covered in the food safety course I have previously taken. Applying all of these concepts by conducting food inspections was an invaluable experience.” –Jacob Gerke

In addition, Alex and Victoria also traveled with VSP to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, where they completed a comprehensive inspection on board the largest cruise ship in the world. Especially in large cruise ships, environmental health plays a critical role in the safety of the passengers and crew. Because cruise ships are like floating cities, on these inspections we saw firsthand many aspects of environmental health issues that communities face but on a more compact and tangible level.

“The SUPEH program has given me a wide range of exposures in the environmental health field and allowed me to interact with various professionals from the field. I have discovered how expansive the environmental health field is and the countless opportunities available. It also has shown me areas and skills that are not addressed in the classroom setting, but are critically important in succeeding at one’s career.” –Alex Choo

While in Atlanta, we also shadowed local health department officials; completed restaurant, pool, and land use inspections; and aided senior environmental health officers in emergency response scenarios. This showed us how environmental health plays an important role locally and statewide.

“As students, we’re given the opportunity to learn everything there is to learn about the realm of environmental health from a desk in a classroom. But taking us out into the field, challenging us with reacting to real life scenarios, and exposing us to the reality of public health concerns...now that’s real environmental health.” –Maha Syed

These rewarding experiences supplemented our assigned office projects. However, the most important and rewarding part of our internship was closing the gap between the classroom and the real world. As required by EHAC accreditation, our curriculum content and, especially, an environmental health-related internship has been crucial for furthering our education and skills. Without real world field experience, environmental health students are simply academicians--we’re missing out on the environmental part of environmental health.