

VIMS graduate students chosen as Knauss fellows

(November 29, 2010) Graduate students Heidi Geisz and Anna Huntley Coffey of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science have earned prestigious John A. Knauss Marine Policy Fellowships through the National Sea Grant Federal Fellows Program.

This one-year fellowship matches outstanding graduate students from around the nation with hosts in legislative or executive offices in Washington, DC. The program provides a unique educational experience for students with interests in policy decisions affecting ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes resources.

The pair recently completed “placement week,” a program that begins with two days of briefings with Congressional staffers, current fellows, and members of host offices; adds a demanding series of 12-15 interviews in selected host offices across the greater DC area; and ends with a mutually agreeable match for each of this year’s 43 Knauss finalists.

The pair’s selection as 2011 Knauss fellows continues a long tradition of involvement in the program by VIMS students. Of the 59 students from institutes of higher education in Virginia who have served as Knauss fellows since the program began in 1979, 37 (63%) have hailed from the College of William and Mary’s School of Marine Science at VIMS.

Placements

Coffey, an executive fellow, was placed at the Department of Energy as a Marine Policy Specialist on the Water Power Team. Geisz, a legislative fellow, was placed on the Committee on Natural Resources - Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife. Both are scheduled to defend their doctoral dissertation at VIMS in early December and to begin their Knauss fellowships on February 1, 2011.

VIMS graduate dean Iris Anderson says the placements “are further evidence of the high quality of our graduate students, and of the many accomplishments of our students and alumni in research and policymaking.”

Coffey says the Water Power Team “develops the most environmentally sound technology for generating renewable wave and ocean thermal energy.” She says her role will be to help coordinate research efforts designed to study how developing and installing this technology might affect marine ecosystems.

Coffey says she applied to the program because she “wanted to have an experience outside of Academia.” She hopes the fellowship will give her “a better grasp on marine policy and how it relates to sustainable, renewable energy.”



Knauss Fellows Anna Huntley Coffey and Heidi Geisz. Photo by Susan Stein.

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“I think this will be the perfect opportunity for me to branch out into a new arena and will help me decide where I would like to take my career,” says Coffey. “I don’t think I realized at first how lucky I am to be able to take part in this program, but I will certainly be talking it up to students for years to come.”

Geisz will serve the House Oceans and Wildlife subcommittee from the office of Congressman Edward Markey of Massachusetts. She says the fellowship will give her “the opportunity to help prepare for all subcommittee and full committee hearings and markups of relevant legislation, and to draft analysis and views of legislation.” She hopes to see at least one piece of legislation though to passage on the House Floor.

Geisz says the opportunity to work with Congressman Markey has a lot to do with her excitement about the fellowship. “He is highly supportive of environmental issues,” says Geisz, “and stresses that science back-up policy decisions.” Geisz was particularly impressed that the Congressman himself conducted her call-back interview: “I thought that said a lot for his dedication to these issues,” she says.

Research experience

Both fellows bring a wealth of research experience to their new positions. For her doctoral dissertation, Geisz worked with co-advisors Rebecca Dickhut and Hugh Ducklow to measure levels of persistent organic pollutants in Antarctic seabirds. She found that melting glacial ice is a new source of old contaminants and that contaminant studies can reveal aspects of bird ecology such as to what degree female birds use fat stores versus local diet to fortify their egg shells.

Coffey worked with faculty advisor Jeff Shields to study how salinity affects the blue crab parasite *Hematodinium*. She found that transmission of the disease is likely limited by salinity levels lower than about 15 parts per thousand (normal seawater is around 35 ppt.)

The Knauss program is named in honor of one of Sea Grant’s founders, former NOAA Administrator John A. Knauss. More information on the program is available at <http://www.seagrant.noaa.gov/knauss/knauss.html>.

Sea Grant is a nationwide network of 32 university-based programs, administered through NOAA, that work with coastal communities to foster science-based decisions about the use and conservation of aquatic resources. The Virginia Sea Grant program is housed on the VIMS campus in Gloucester Point and administered through VIMS and the College of William and Mary.