Danielle Johnson  
Reproductive Rights Activist Services Corps 2017 Internship Report  
Alaska Community Action on Toxics

This summer I had the pleasure of traveling from the lower 48 to the beautiful 49th State of Alaska to intern at Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT). I am grateful to have had such an eye-opening experience and the opportunity to meet such amazing people in this work. ACAT is an environmental organization that advocates for environmental health and justice and works locally, nationally, and internationally with communities to help eliminate exposure to toxic chemicals through research, education, organizing, and advocacy. This summer provided me with immense exposure to reproductive justice, environmental justice, and indigenous rights, and the ability to participate in the conversation. To summarize my experience in just a few words prior to unpacking it all in this paper, this summer provided me with community, solidarity, progressiveness, hope, and unity.

Alaska is on the frontline of climate change and environmentalism as its vast, pristine, and resource-abundant lands are composed of wildlife, mountains, and glaciers. I quickly learned in my first day the battle Alaska was facing — the dichotomy between development of its resources, and protection and sustainable efforts to preserve nature and protect humans. My first day was also composed of a tour of the office, where I met the wonderful all-women staff of ACAT, as well as a meeting the Director of ACAT, Pam, and Sama, the Director of Environmental Health. I remember eagerly discussing my list of projects and feelings of excitement, as I could not wait to get started.

My summer projects were tailored to reproductive and environmental justice. The first project I worked on this summer was ACAT’s Breast Cancer and the Environment
fact sheet. This fact sheet was designed for everyday women and focused specifically on prevention. I had the opportunity to update this sheet by doing extensive research on new preventative methods as well as doing a literature search to see if there were any additional chemicals linked to breast cancer. I was able to complete my review and update of the fact sheet in time for the Alaska Run for Women, where we had a table and were able to supply the fact sheet to attendees of the run. Subsequent to the Alaska Run for Women, I assisted ACAT in their Breast Cancer Lecture Series, where we hosted a keynote speaker who I had the opportunity of attending grand rounds at hospitals with, as well as attending ACAT’s public lecture. The lectures were a great way to raise awareness in the community and to health care providers about environmental contributors to our health, and the disproportionate exposures suffered by native communities and people of color. I believe the lecture did an incredible job calling attention to the importance of environmental and reproductive justice, addressing the fact that women and children suffer from environmental toxins uniquely. The keynote speaker did a fair job calling to improve reproductive health through chemical policy, as families should have the right to raise their children in a healthy environment and not bear the burden of being contaminated without consent.

The next projects I worked on were a Children’s Environmental Health toolkit and ACAT’s Reproductive Health and the Environment Bulletin. The Children’s Environmental Health Toolkit is a toolkit I drafted for ACAT, which is designed to provide information on environmental exposure to new native parents. I based the design of the toolkit off the Environmental Health Toolkit ACAT already had for community health aides. The most difficult part of creating this toolkit was designing it to be user-
friendly, i.e. making it easily readable for parents as well as making sure the information was not overwhelming. I had to be creative in designing this toolkit, so I condensed information in visual ways such as charts and infographics. The toolkit contains: a Children’s Environmental Health Assessment Form, a Children’s Environmental Health Reference Card that includes chemicals, exposure, and prevention methods, and a Precautionary Guide that is broken down into developmental stages and what exposures to look for during that time. This toolkit provides parents with precautions to take prior to conception through maturation of their child. This project was truly remarkable because Alaskan native children are twice as likely to be born with birth defects than non-native children. When including the chemicals of interest, I was overwhelmed by the amount of chemicals present in Alaska’s environment, which included waste from military superfund sites, lead, PCBs, PBDEs and other POPs.

I also worked on updating the Reproductive Health and the Environment bulletin. This bulletin was designed for community health aides and other healthcare providers. I was able to find additional studies to provide for the bulletin, including recent findings about endocrine-disrupting chemicals. This project allowed me to be analytical and critical as I scoured scientific literature, read information, and presented my suggestions to my supervisors. In addition to these two large projects, I assisted ACAT with preparing for their community-based disease data registry — requested by a native community — in which I prepared handout material and quick fact sheets about reducing exposure to toxic chemicals.

Along with office work this summer, I got to engage in the community with other organizations. This is a year of solidarity for ACAT, so along with my main projects I
had the opportunity to attend rallies co-sponsored and hosted by other nonprofits. One rally I attended this summer was hosted by Defend the Sacred, a coalition of different groups. This rally was about defending lands deemed sacred that are in jeopardy of being developed by the current administration and corporations, posing a threat to the health of people and the land. Another rally I had the opportunity to attend was one to call on Senators Dan Sullivan and Lisa Murkowski to oppose the proposed health care bill. In addition to these rallies, I had the opportunity of attending a summit for Alaskan Progressives and volunteering with other organizations such as the Alaska Center at their activism art events.

This internship was an amazing experience. To be able to jump into this internship and make the most of it, I had to be adaptable. There was a learning curve at first, which I was able to get through by extensive online research and conversations with coworkers over the political and economic climate of Alaska, the lifestyles of Alaskans including non-natives and natives, toxic chemicals, and the Arctic environment. Another difficulty I ran into during my internship was self-confidence. There were moments I felt as though I was not doing something right or not enough, due to the barrier of not having lived in Alaska, as well as working independently. Throughout the summer I was able to overcome these bouts by talking with my supervisor, setting goals for myself, and self-assurance that I was doing okay.

One of the highlights of the internship definitely had to be the office environment. The staff was very supportive. This office community was full of bright spirits and hard workers. Being around this group of women only inspired me more to do my best. Another highlight of my experience definitely had to be the location of the internship.
Alaska is a beautiful place and it was interesting learning about the native communities and working with these individuals as well as working with a variety of organizations.

In addition to these highlights, I loved how much I learned, increasing my knowledge and cultural competency. I learned more about the intersections of reproductive rights and other social justice issues. I was able to learn more about reproductive health in general from a chemical standpoint. As I mentioned before, I learned more about Alaskan natives, specifically the community of St. Lawrence Island which predominately lives a subsistence lifestyle. This has increased their exposure to certain toxic chemicals, some of which are endocrine disruptors, which affects hormone regulation and in turn reproductive health. These individuals are being exposed without consent and have the right to have healthy children to carry on their traditions, community knowledge, and way of life. When working with these communities, such as St. Lawrence Island, reproductive health provided the framework ACAT used as a lens to act for environmental rights and indigenous rights, and the framework I adopted when completing some of my summer projects.

Completing my internship allowed me to truly reflect on how well my educational experience has prepared me. My interdisciplinary coursework in hard sciences as well as environmental health helped prepare me adequately for the work I faced. Stepping into my internship I had prior knowledge of most of the material I worked with, and if I did not I was able to use critical skills to pick up information quickly and make sense of things. This internship also added to my educational experience, as I can use what I learned this summer in the classroom.
Additionally, this internship not only contributed to my working knowledge, but also to my career path. After undergraduate I plan on attending medical school. Working for ACAT allowed me to continue gaining knowledge and an awareness of the environment’s affect on health, growing my interest in environmental medicine. Additionally, my projects shaped my interest in maternal and child health, which I am considering pursuing in medical school. Furthermore, this internship has helped me to continue to pursue my interest in working with disadvantaged communities.

ACAT is a powerhouse making changes on the local, national, and international level. Everyday working there, the women never failed to impress me as they selflessly worked towards fighting for environmental justice in the community. It was an awesome reminder that activism comes from the community and everyday people. ACAT holds a special place in my heart, and I could not imagine my experience being better. ACAT took me in with open arms, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have served the organization — I look forward to our paths crossing again. If I had to give advice to future potential interns interested in this organization, I suggest being tenacious in this work. It is a lot of work when the administration is not in your favor, but that means you just have to push back twice as hard, and take every victory as it is.