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A PROJECT MADE POSSIBLE BY SAEF

Adventures in Alaska

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I have spent fifteen of the past forty-three weeks in Alaska, gathering material to write a creative-nonfiction undergraduate thesis. The finished product will consist of several long profiles on what I'm provisionally calling "adventure scientists"—individuals who combine scientific expertise with wilderness travel skills to study geographically inaccessible parts of the earth system.

I have spent significant time in the backcountry with each profile subject, and I am using these firsthand experiences as narrative frames within which to explore the interesting and unusual aspects of each scientist's career. I seek chiefly to entertain readers, but also to bring to life an important side of climate science that receives little attention.

I used Princeton's Martin A. Dale '53 Award last summer to broadly explore Alaska and to identify profile subjects, and I have used a SAEF grant to fund more focused research efforts. I will briefly describe some of these activities below.

During my first four weeks in Alaska I climbed Denali as part of a thirteen-member expedition that comprised the entire human presence on the north side of the mountain that year. My SAEF grant did not pay for the climb, but I mention it because the accomplishment later helped me secure invitations to join scientists in the field.

I then travelled to Utqiagvik, the northernmost city in the US, where Inuit leaders from Russia, Greenland, Canada, and the US gathered to discuss indigenous rights, self-determination, and threats posed to the Inuit by climate change, among other issues. While there, I spoke with lieutenant governor Byron Mallott about the identity crisis Alaska now faces as both a major fossil fuel producer and a locus of dramatic climate change. I shadowed restoration ecologist Lorene Lynn as she collected indigenous vegetables for a new botanical garden. I walked dogs on Arctic tundra with Geoff Carroll, a wildlife biologist who, until retiring several years ago, was charged by the Department of Fish and Game with counting and monitoring all land mammals in a region the area of Iowa. He was also a member of the first expedition to reach the North Pole by dog sled.

In Anchorage, I met with several ornithologists to learn about a troubling rash of bird die-offs in the Chukchi and Bering Seas. I met Pat Pourchot, an ardent conservationist with whom John McPhee visited the Brooks Range more than forty years ago, as described in McPhee's book *Coming into the Country*. I went caribou hunting with an ex-professional skier and his father, a commercial fisherman who has observed firsthand the effects of ocean acidification and overfishing in the Gulf of Alaska. I went moose hunting with Roman Dial, a professor of biology at Alaska Pacific University and one of Alaska's most accomplished outdoorsmen. This summer I will accompany Dial and several of his students as they hike and packraft 350 miles of the Brooks Range to study the effects of climate change on the northern tree line.

In Homer I visited the first of over a hundred commercial peony farms to sprout in Alaska over the past thirteen years in one of the state's more unlikely economic booms, and in Fairbanks I toured Alaska's first experimental peony garden with the horticulturalist who planted it. Also while in Fairbanks, I flew in a two-seat Cessna with Matt Nolan, an independent scientist who uses a homemade photogrammetry system to produce extremely precise, economical, and useful topographic maps of landscapes impacted by climate change and oil production. I met Nancy Fresco, the coordinator of the Scenarios Network for Alaska and Arctic Planning (SNAP), an organization of researchers that attempts to bridge the gap between climate scientists and decision-makers to develop land, wildlife, and resource management policies. I visited the HooDoo brewery with Jack Hébert, who Joe McGinniss wrote about nearly forty years ago in Going to Extremes, and who has since founded the Cold Climate Housing Research Center, a nonprofit corporation working to address the engineering challenges

presented by rapid climate change in the Arctic. I met Kenji Yoshikawa, a permafrost scientist and world explorer who has gathered baseline data on frozen regions that scientists previously considered inaccessible.

I returned to Alaska this January using my SAEF grant to spend eighteen days at Yoshikawa's farm, where he is raising a team of reindeer to pull him, Santa Claus style, across arctic Alaska. During this time I spoke with several of his friends and colleagues, observed his techniques for living off of the electrical grid and water supply, and looked after his property and reindeer for eleven days in his absence. The temperature, during my time alone, dropped as low as 49 degrees below zero.

I will forever be grateful to SAEF for affording me the opportunity to carry out this research, both because I learned more from my time in Alaska than I have from any other educational experience of comparable duration, and because I expect it to bear literary fruit in the near future.

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