

Internships: More than a Summer Job

The DFO Maritimes and Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia Aboriginal Internship Program

A unique internship for Indigenous students is helping to heal the broken relationship between government and Indigenous communities says a student participant in the Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) internship program.

Now in its tenth year, the internship program has benefitted both the federal department and the 13 Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia. Its success has also led to the development of a similar program in New Brunswick, which is now its fourth year.

Working as interns at DFO opens a window into the world of government while also providing government a window into the Indigenous world says Farrah Stevens, who participated in the Nova Scotia program during the summers of 2015 and 2016.

“Indigenous interns teach the department’s staff the political structure of our communities, who we are as communities and how to engage with us,” Stevens says. And, based on her internship experiences, she was able to help her community learn how DFO operates and the breadth of those operations.

Stevens looked to the department to gain some experience in the field of environmental stewardship while working on her environmental science degree. She now works in DFO’s Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program where she interned. During those two summers, Stevens acquired technical knowledge. She also learned what it was like to work at a government agency which helped her pass the screening process to get her current job.

Stevens’ experience in the internship program is the fruit of a 2009 collaboration between the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq Chiefs and the Maritimes Region of DFO, with the support of Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn Negotiation Office. Not only does the program equip students with knowledge, skills and experience, it helps strengthen the working relationship between DFO and Mi'kmaq communities.



“Interns help communities understand that the department is more than an organization. It is a group of people who want to collaboratively work alongside First Nations,” explains Sophie Pitre-Arseneault, Manager of the internship program at DFO. “In turn, the program helps to build some strong bridges between the department and First Nations communities.”

This summer, at least four interns will participate in the program in Nova Scotia, and another two to four in New Brunswick. A total of 12 interns participated in 2019, the largest ever.

“I had so much hands-on training in my internship,” says Brontë Thomas who was a New Brunswick intern at the St. Andrews Biological Station in 2017. Even though Thomas was enrolled in psychology and sociology at university, and not marine biology, the station’s scientists would invite Thomas out on to research vessels or into their labs and welcomed all of her questions. “They were always so nice and so patient. I can’t say enough good things about the staff.”

The internship led directly to Thomas’ being employed in her Peskotomuhkati community to work on a number of projects, such as the Coastal Environmental Baseline Project. “We are looking at microplastics in the digestive track of American lobsters around the Port of St. John,” Thomas said. Lobster is a traditional food source and microplastics may be impacting their health.

“Every single day, I have applied what I learned as a DFO intern. ...it was probably one of the most enriching programs I have ever participated in!”

Thomas says her experience shows you do not need a marine biology background to intern at DFO because it is a diverse organization. The networking alone was a great benefit given the variety of people she met. This included fellow interns and people from different communities. Thomas says having these contacts have been very helpful in her current job.

“I think the internship helps communities by showing Indigenous youth that there are opportunities outside the reserve,” says Melanie Hardy, a Nova Scotia intern during the summers of 2017 and 2018.

For Hardy, one the keys to her successful internship was being made welcome and supported by DFO staff. “When you leave your community, you feel isolated and intimidated by the government environment,” says Hardy who has gone on to a full-time position as a data analyst in the Oceans and Ecosystems Science Division at the department.

Being made welcome also meant being able to work in different divisions depending on what best suited the interests of the intern. “I was always being asked if I was enjoying myself,” she said.

Interns also spend at least one week working in their community to learn some other hands-on skills and to share their experiences working inside the department. “We can bring our knowledge about the opportunities and diversity of DFO back to the community,” says Stevens.

An Elder advisor component was added to the internship program in 2019 to provide the kind of spiritual and emotional support interns would have in their own community. Although this was not in place during Hardy’s internship, she said it will be of great benefit. “A familiar face helps when you’re struggling,” she says.

“This is especially important when tragedy happens back in community and you have no one else local to talk to.”

To anyone interested in working for a government agency, the Mi’kmaq internship is a great opportunity to gain skills and knowledge. At the same time, it “adds diversity to the DFO workplace and is helping mend relationships,” Hardy concludes.

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