

USU researcher to join women's Antarctic forum

By Kevin Opsahl staff writer Dec 4, 2015

A Utah State University post-doctoral researcher will join climate scientists from around the world next year in what is being billed as the biggest all-women expedition to Antarctica.

Melissa Haeffner was selected to be part of a project with 77 other women called “Undisciplined: Leading Climate Solutions by Bridging the Sciences,” Dec. 2 to 21, 2016, which aims to build a network of women leaders in science and to raise awareness of gender under-representation in the sciences. The voyage will also form part of a documentary series exploring the role of women.



Melissa Haeffner will participate in an all-women expedition to Antarctica next year. Eli Lucero/Herald Journal

Because of her sociologist background, Haeffner said she didn’t think she’d make the cut competing with climate scientists when she submitted a video to Homeward Bound, the Australian-based group sponsoring the trip, explaining why she should go — but she did.

The Antarctica trip will only build on her past experiences traveling abroad to meet and collaborate with other scientists.

“What I realized is that social scientists can play a real role in working with ecologists and other kinds of scientists to come up with better research questions, research design in ways that are relevant to people in society,” Haeffner said. “I hope to continue this idea of bridging the social and natural sciences (in Antarctica).”

A self-described “social hydrologist,” Haeffner’s research project during the expedition proposes a series of qualitative interviews with fellow female scientists. She will be only one of two social scientists on the trip.

“I want to understand what they see are barriers and opportunities to collaborate with social scientists,” said Haeffner, noting she envisions it as a larger project with the findings to be published in a peer-reviewed journal. “What I see is there’s a division between the biophysical sciences and the social sciences. You either do biology or sociology; we need to work together on actual research.”

Haeffner said scientists are trying to bridge the divide, but “there are so many challenges, it’s just not happening.”

And it’s especially important that scientists come together for climate change, the post-doctoral researcher explained.

“I think everyone I talk to understands that if we want to solve problems of climate change, we have to come at it from every angle — from the human to the environment aspect,” Haeffner said.

Women in leadership

The Antarctica expedition is organized by Homeward Bound, a “leadership and strategy program” for women scientists, according to the group’s website. The initiative is the start of a 10-year outreach to build global collaboration of 1,000 women in science. Fabian Dattner, founding partner of Dattner Grant and co-founder of Homeward Bound, said the Antarctica trip is certainly not the first time women have traveled there; but it is probably the largest gathering of women for a trip to that location. The 2016 trip set against a notion that women are still overlooked in leadership positions, Dattner said.

“The fact is, the world has manifestly failed to recoup the significant contribution women leaders could make to the wellness of our world,”

Dattner said. “The inclusion of women at a leadership table — for their differences not their sameness — may be single most influential thing we can do today toward a just future, because we know ... women are inclined to have legacy mindset; they think of the collective; they are more ethical with money; more inclusive in decision-making; they think on behalf of ‘we’ not ‘me.’”

During next year’s trip, Dattner said she envisions a certain dynamic with women that could not be achieved with an exclusively male group.

“When you bring large groups of expert women together, they collaborate ... it communicates all women are helping everyone,” Dattner said. “Men, a lot of the time, are jockeying for position. The most senior people start to collaborate and quickly a hierarchy emerges.”

With this trip to Antarctica the voyagers will get a sense of “what it means to be a community of women fighting for the wellness of the planet,” Dattner said.

“There’s probably no greater place on the planet as to what is happening to our planet than the poles,” Dattner said, adding that the women on the trip will be more able as leaders to influence the world.

“Our intent is they will not and cannot walk away from their role as leaders in our world today,” Dattner said. “What’s happening to our planet is unambiguous.”

Haeffner agreed with Dattner’s characterization of the gender leadership gap, saying it parallels the division she sees between biologists and social scientists.

“We can talk about gender equality, and people want that, but it’s not happening,” Haeffner said, citing numerous studies on the gender gap. “We don’t have gender equality or equity; we’re getting there and it’s improving every year, but it’s not improving that much.”

Haeffner believes Homeward Bound’s trip is a good start to having a larger conversation on gender equality.

“It brings more attention to this issue that I have not seen brought up so much in the scientific world,” Haeffner said, adding women are getting more Ph.Ds but are still trailing men in academic leadership positions. “It’s not that we ‘hate men,’ it’s that women are just as qualified, have a voice, have something to say, and it can really change things if it’s brought to the table.”

That notion is true on the issue of climate change, the USU post-doctoral researcher said.

“In the climate change conversation, we are stuck,” Haeffner said. “When we get new voices into the conversation, then we can move the conversation forward and it can benefit everyone.”



More Information

Melissa Haeffner’s expedition to Antarctica will be crowdfunded through Instrument1, part of the all-women voyage to Antarctica where climate change is used as an example as to how women can make a pronounced difference in the world today. The campaign is part of the Arctic-Antarctic Challenge in which there will be two grants - first place wins a \$500 Instrument1 Research Grant, and second place wins a \$250 Instrument1 Research Grant. The two researchers, out of 10, to raise the most money by 11 a.m. Dec. 15 will win the Instrument1 Research Grants (first and second place, respectively). Instrument1 is a woman-owned start-up which invests in researchers solving the world’s greatest challenges. For more information, visit <https://www.instrument1.com/campaigns/leading-climate-solutions-by-bridging-the-sciences/>

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