

Interview with Joanna Young by Louise Lap - Gender CC



Joanna is an outdoors addict with a love of mountains. With a background in Physics/Astronomy (B.Sc.), Philosophy of Science (B.A.) and now Geophysics (M.Sc.), she is a PhD candidate at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, studying how Alaska's glaciers are shrinking in climate change. Joanna is also Program Lead for Girls on Ice Alaska, a unique, free, mountaineering and science experience for underserved high school girls on a sub-Arctic glacier. She also studies the impacts of Girls on Ice on perceptions of climate change. In December 2016, Joanna was a participant on the inaugural expedition of Homeward Bound, where she got to witness the beauty and fragility of the Antarctic ecosystem, and where she learned how to be a better leader towards her goals of environmental stewardship. Outside of work, Joanna lives in a cabin, runs trails, skis the backcountry and rafts rivers, to be in the wilderness as much as possible.

LL: What difference would it make if women were adequately represented in climate science?

JY: In my experience, the women I have worked with are interested in knowing how their findings are relevant outside of the academic sphere – relevant to communities, resource managers and the public as a whole. I have met many incredible women who spend a lot of time working on interdisciplinary projects with many researchers and stakeholders, outreach and education to schools and public audiences, and engagement of community members in citizen science projects. This is the way forward – making climate science findings relevant and meaningful to the rest of the world. I believe that, because women have a tendency to think broadly and long-term, having more women in climate science would mean having more public buy-in to the importance of these findings to people and the planet.

LL: Why should more women and girls work in climate science?

JY: Climate science has a lot to offer! It is fascinating - it involves the mixing of the oceans, the circulation of freshwater through rivers and glaciers and clouds, the different layers of the atmosphere, the pathways of storms and the time spans of droughts and floods. And the impacts are just as far-reaching - from melting glacier ice, to changing seasons, to greening of the polar regions, to loss of sea ice, to loss of habitat for different species, to ocean acidification. Climate findings are also important for communities and people, who are impacted by eroding coastlines or disappearing freshwater resources. There are many different topics to explore in climate science, and in each one you have an opportunity to help us better understand our global ecosystem, and the importance of each element to our planet and to people. You can contribute and have a positive impact! And, you can be challenged, grow and learn, and explore beautiful corners of the planet. Only in this line of work does a person like me get to see glaciers in the remote mountain ranges of Alaska, and learn how to build weather stations from scratch, for example. How neat is that!

LL: What has been your greatest achievement so far?

JY: Getting to where I am today has taken some work! I am proud of my many achievements, but I am especially proud of the work I do to encourage young women to explore Earth sciences and to be their best selves through a program I help run called Inspiring Girls Expeditions. Inspiring Girls programs take high school girls from underrepresented groups into the backcountry to learn about the environment, the scientific process, art, and backcountry travel. I run an Inspiring Girls program called Girls on Ice Alaska, which takes 9 girls onto a glacier for 8 days where we camp on ice, climb peaks, conduct science experiments, and see the changes happening to an Alaska glacier in real time. It is a great joy for me to know that at the end of every program, there are 9 more girls in this world who understand how spectacular and fragile our interconnected ecosystems are, how fascinating scientific exploration can be, and how much more they are capable of than they ever knew.

LL: What would you say to encourage more women and girls to work in climate science?

JY: Our planet needs you!