Dr. Sarah Trainor was welcomed to IARC in 2012, along with the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy (ACCAP) research unit. As ACCAP Director, Trainor oversees the organization’s mission to improve links between climate science and society, through better communication of science research and strong relationships with stakeholders. Trainor has been published and recognized widely for her work, which includes project support from the US Department of the Interior, the Joint Fire Sciences Program, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Recently, IARC’s Publications team sat down with Sarah Trainor to discuss her background, perspectives, and ongoing work.

What would people be interested to know about your current projects?

Most of my recent work relates to the two grant-based organizations—ACCAP and the Alaska Fire Science Consortium (AFSC)—that I’ve had the pleasure to lead. Because of ACCAP’s important focus on Alaska’s various stakeholder groups, which include federal and state agencies, industry, tribal governments, and various non-profit groups across the state, I’ve sought out work that bridges the gap between climate science and the way our communities respond to change.

One of these projects documents Alaskan’s current and ongoing response to climate and environmental change. Since climate change is happening more rapidly here than elsewhere, it is instructive to understand how our communities, industries, and governments react. This can also help us assist with adaptation to environmental change. Another project aims to construct networked maps of current scientific research, application, climate services, and adaptation; by making these knowledge networks clearer, we can enable more efficient partnership of science with our stakeholders.

What do you think is important for people to understand about your work?

I think what distinguishes my experience from a more traditional scientific career is that regardless of the subject matter or stage of research, I have always maintained a sharp focus on potential human connections. Sometimes, these elements are clear, as in ACCAP’s work to connect scientists and communities. Other times, they have more creative results, as in the recent “Art of Fire” AFSC project, which promoted public awareness of fire science through commissioned visual artwork and associated field trips, lectures, and gallery shows. I believe it’s important to regard science as a part of culture, and as such, to engage with other aspects of society and culture.

How has your background contributed to your scientific career?

For one, my education has been strongly interdisciplinary, with degrees in philosophy, environmental studies, and energy and resources. As a result of my formal study as well as a lifelong, pervasive interest in the natural world, it’s always been important for me to recognize connections between the way we study the world around us and the way we think of ourselves. I think this kind of approach also makes it much easier to see and undertake ways of making the world a better place to live.

What advice can you offer for students in the sciences?

The most meaningful scientific work, in my view, derives from recognizing problems, questions, and situations from many different perspectives—for me, this may mean different industries, government agencies, or tribal groups; for others, it could be various disciplines or academic departments. Regardless, it emphasizes what I consider the scientific skills of listening, writing, and the practice of seeing different points of view, values, and priorities.