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# local stories

An Arctic expedition  
A Chico Junior High teacher prepares to embark on a research trip to study climate change in Greenland

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This article was published on [04.26.07](#).

**Mary Anne Pella-Donnelly smiles widely** as she walks out of her seventh-grade classroom. From inside come shouts of "xylum!" and "phylum!" This period a student teacher has taken over, leaving Pella-Donnelly free to talk about things other than the inner workings of plants. On the way to the quad, a few students approach her, and she jokes around with them before they're on their way.

Pella-Donnelly is a woman who obviously enjoys her job--and it's a good thing, too, because she's been teaching for 20 years. Three of those have been at Chico Junior High, where she introduces seventh graders to the world of life science. In a few months, however, she's going to be the one taking the lessons.

From July 10 until Aug. 7, Pella-Donnelly will say so long to her cute floral-print skirts and black flats. She'll kiss her kids goodbye--she's got four of them--and she'll leave little Chico behind for, well, icier pastures. Her classroom, it turns out, will be Greenland.

"It's going to be extreme," she said. "Twenty-four hours of sunlight. The temperature will be 10 below--and might even get to 20 or 30 below."

Somehow, she retains her smile while saying this, even while adding that she'll be sleeping in a tent that is surrounded by an electric fence to keep out polar bears.

Pella-Donnelly will be joining a group of five researchers in a remote area in the high Arctic. The subject of their research is the little auk sea bird--a small black and white bird that feeds on zoo plankton. In other words, it's a bottom feeder. As Pella-Donnelly explains it, in the Arctic it is very difficult to study the organisms at the bottom of the food chain directly--so they look to those who eat them.

"Changes in their food will pretty quickly be felt by sea birds," she said. "It's an indicator of climate change in that region."

So, by studying the little auks, the research team hopes to determine whether the climate is changing--they're looking for indications of global warming. The team Pella-Donnelly will be joining has been at work in Greenland for two years already, and she had an opportunity to meet the leader, Ann Harding from Alaska Pacific University, last month at a retreat in Anchorage.



**A WHOLE NEW WORLD**  
Mary Anne Pella-Donnelly, a seventh-grade science teacher at Chico Junior High, will spend a month in Greenland (region depicted below) researching climate change by studying the little auk sea bird (bottom photo).  
PHOTO BY MEREDITH J. COOPER  
International Polar Year:  
The International Council for Science and the World Meteorological Organization dubbed March 2007 to March 2009 the International Polar

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"She's really passionate about this study," Pella-Donnelly said, "and education--she's set up with a school in Greenland to bring some students out to the field site. I'll create some lessons and work with the school to bring in science education."

Year. Its purpose is to turn attention to climate change in polar regions. For more information, visit [www.ipv.org](http://www.ipv.org). [www.polarrec.com](http://www.polarrec.com)

Getting to the field site is no easy task, either. She figures she'll have to be helicoptered in, and unless the ice breaks up enough by the end of her stay so she can take a boat out, she'll be helicoptered out as well. Supplies are being sent via dogsled.

**All of this is part of the Polar-TREC program.** (TREC stands for Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating.) It brings educators into the field with researchers so that they can interact with their students both while they are away and when they return to their classrooms.

"I'll be there to assist, educate, let people know my experience. I will interview scientists to find out what they're all about," Pella-Donnelly said. "And then I'll visit classrooms

around Chico."

While she tries to find some activity every summer that gives her professional experience, Pella-Donnelly said she has never participated in such a large endeavor.

"I've done some field research, but not anything with a true primitive field camp, doing primary research," she said.

When she first heard about the PolarTREC program, she told her students about it. "How many of you would like to go to the North Pole?" she asked. Their enthusiasm got her blood pumping, and she applied. Much to her surprise she was chosen, along with just 14 other K-12 teachers in the United States.

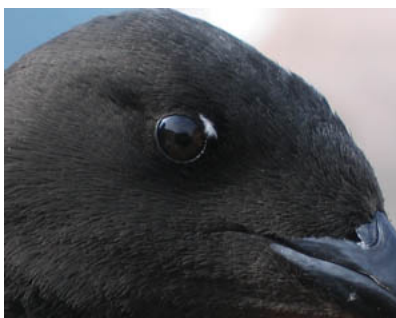
PolarTREC is funded by ARCUS, the Arctic Research Consortium of the United States, which started the program with the name TREC a couple of years ago. Researchers were contacted and asked if they would be interested in having an educator join their team for two to six weeks.

The 15 teachers chosen this year will be sent out to teams in Greenland, Alaska, Russia and the Antarctic. Some will study changes to the polar ice shelf, while others will collect data on atmospheric ozone.

All of the teachers are outfitted with some fancy equipment, too, to make their trips worthwhile. Pella-Donnelly said she'll be given a laptop and digital camera as well as a satellite phone. Every day she is expected to submit a journal entry, and there will be a few opportunities for podcasts as well. Both will be found on PolarTREC's Web site, [www.polarrec.com](http://www.polarrec.com).

"I really hope to get students involved in climate change," Pella-Donnelly said. "And after this, I won't just say, 'Oh yeah, I saw that movie *An Inconvenient Truth*.' I'll be able to say, 'I know people who are doing this kind of research.' "

In truth, she'll be able to say more. After a month studying the little auk sea bird, living in a tent in below-freezing temperatures, she'll be able to say that she helped *do* some of that research.



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THIS WEEK - 06.14.2007

GO

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