

UC SANTA BARBARA

# THE *Current*

[Science + Technology](#)

## **NCEAS's Alexandra Phillips has been awarded the first Legislative Branch Fellowship in Climate Science by the American Association for the Advancement of Science**

[Sonia Fernandez](#)

August 7, 2023

Share this article



She's heading to The Hill! [Alexandra Phillips](#), science communication and policy officer at UC Santa Barbara's National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (NCEAS), goes to Washington, D.C., this month to begin a yearlong congressional fellowship, sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). The first-ever AAAS Legislative Branch Fellow in Climate Science, Phillips hopes to use her own ocean science background to help inform policy and shed light on emerging climate-related issues.

“I’m really eager to dive in — I’ve always enjoyed working at the interface of science, communication and policy,” Phillips said. “This feels like a natural extension of the work I’ve been doing at NCEAS and in my scientific research. I think it will be my biggest challenge yet as a science communicator, but I also hope it will be the most rewarding and impactful.”

Now more than ever, science literacy is necessary to craft public policies with lasting, beneficial and equitable impacts. From issues of food insecurity to pandemics, from water scarcity to pollution or the rise of artificial intelligence, it’s clear that scientific knowledge is needed to address growing global concerns.

“The AAAS legislative branch fellowship is a way to connect scientists to policy by placing them in a senator’s, representative’s, or committee’s office to work,” Phillips said. Her duties will include researching and helping to draft legislation as well as providing input on policy review and oversight.

It’s an ideal outlet for Phillips’s skillset. After graduating from UC Santa Barbara with a degree in biology from the College of Creative Studies she studied as a graduate student at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech), where she was selected to be a fellow in the American Geophysical Union’s (AGU) Voices for Science program. This turned out to be a pivotal post, one that set her on her current course.

“We noticed that despite so much interest, grad students and postdocs were rarely given any training to engage in science policy,” she said.

Alongside fellow AGU science advocate Elizabeth Hetherington, Phillips co-wrote a [guide for scientists](#) who want to engage in science policy and communication. Then she put that guide to the test by training a small cohort of Caltech graduate and postdoctoral students on science communication in the public sphere: government processes, effective writing and science advocacy. She also immersed herself in the environment, meeting with elected officials to discuss topics as diverse as water policy, STEM education, fundamental research and science funding.

Upon finishing graduate school, Phillips moved back to UCSB in 2021 to complete postdoctoral work in the Morgan Raven Lab and took a position with NCEAS as a science communication and policy officer.

Her fellowship will be, as she says, her biggest challenge yet, as we face our biggest challenge to date: climate change. Not only is climate change a global matter with the potential to impact every aspect of life, it's an open-ended, constantly shifting situation. Phillips will be leaning on her interest in the field of carbon sequestration to communicate one of the most fundamental aspects of climate change — the persistence of carbon emissions in the atmosphere, and how these emissions may be kept out of the atmosphere.

“I think that we're still grappling with fundamental questions in climate science around effective carbon sequestration strategies, especially in the ocean,” she said, “so I think the challenge is going to be how to communicate the uncertainty around some components while still allowing policy to take steps in those areas we are certain about.

“I love coming in as a climate scientist because it is so interdisciplinary — you have to know enough about the math and physics behind global models, but you also need to understand the socioeconomic impacts of events like hurricanes,” she said. “I hope my passion for interdisciplinary science makes me an asset on The Hill.”

Tags

[Climate Change](#)

Media Contact

**Sonia Fernandez**

Senior Science Writer

[sfernandez@ucsb.edu](mailto:sfernandez@ucsb.edu)

Share this article



---

## About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community

of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.