From South America to Russia, Studying “The Undiscovered Country”

Erica Hill’s diverse career in anthropology has taken her from investigating human sacrifices in Peru to excavating walrus heads in Siberia. But wide-ranging is the way the Alaska EPSCoR faculty member prefers it.

“I just am fascinated by a lot of different things, and anthropology is a field that fosters that,” said Hill. “Basically, you can study anything that relates to humans.”

Hill works as an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Alaska Southeast, a position half funded by EPSCoR and half by UAS. She is the first faculty hire made by EPSCoR under its Phase III NSF grant, which began in July 2007, as well as EPSCoR’s first hire in the social sciences.

Hill’s primary study areas are actually far removed from Alaska, both geographically and culturally: her research focus throughout her career has mostly been prehistoric death rituals, in particular human sacrifices. Hill said her interest in the macabre subject comes from the way different cultures tackle a universal topic.

“I’m just fascinated by the creative ways that humans around the world have dealt with this common concern,” she said. “Everybody dies, but the way that humans deal with this issue is incredibly diverse and incredibly fascinating. Death is a problem, but people have solved it in all kinds of different ways.”

Hill, who holds both a master’s and doctorate in archaelogy from the University of New Mexico, moved to Alaska with her husband in 2002 and spent five years working at the University of Alaska Museum of the North and the UA Press before relocating to Juneau for her new position. Her research focus in the north has shifted to zooarcheology, including spending time this summer studying the apparently ritual disposal of walrus heads at a site in the Russian Far East. She’s researching what caused the area’s ancient inhabitants to lug the skulls up a hill after killing the walruses.

“They’re incredibly heavy,” she said. “Their skulls are some of the densest bone around … what was the need to carry these walrus heads up the hill and place so many of them in the site itself?”

Hill plans to compare the site to others, and also examine how these ancient practices may relate to modern ones. She sees her study of these relations as the key to why EPSCoR has taken her on. “I think my interest in how ancient and modern peoples have conceptualized the animals that are so important to their existence is the aspect that most reflects the interests of EPSCoR,” she said.

Hill will be followed by two full-time and six quarter-time social scientist hires, among other hires, in the current grant cycle as EPSCoR researchers seek to integrate physical and biological science findings with their sociological impacts. In addition to her research, she’s teaching a variety of courses in Juneau, including zooarcheology, bioanthropology, cultural dynamics, and ethnobiology.