

PAUL BUNJE | Senior Director of Oceans, XPRIZE Foundation, paul.bunje@xprize.org

Degree: When, where, what, and what in?

I received my PhD in integrative biology in 2004 from UC Berkeley, where I studied the evolution of diversity using phylogeography and systematics in a group of marine and freshwater snails (gastropods).

Did you stay in academia at all, and if so, for how long?

Following my PhD, I took a postdoctoral research position for two years at the University of Konstanz in Germany. I studied the genomic evolution of diversity and evolutionary development of cichlid fish. After a non-academic fellowship, I returned to academia at UCLA (see below).

How did you go about searching for a job outside of the university setting?

I never intended to continue working in academia permanently. In fact, following my PhD, and discovering that there were few career paths for a scientist except academia, I considered (and even half-heartedly applied for) tenure-track positions in academia. I had always had a keen interest in the applications of science for protecting the environment, and the AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellowship was one of the only ways to gain relevant policy experience and skills. So I applied for it and got it.

Following the fellowship, I applied for several jobs using contacts that I had gained—networking is the best way to generate a good and relevant job. I turned down a great opportunity outside of academia in order to build my own effort, which happened to be at a university.

Is this the only job (post-academia) that you've had? If not, what else did you do?

Following the AAAS Fellowship, I took a position at the University of California,

Los Angeles (UCLA), Institute of the Environment. I had approached the director of this institute, and her successor, with an idea to build a science-policy interface organization that worked on climate change. While I was technically a researcher, and organized significant research grants as well as conducting my own research, this position was really focused on working to bridge the gap between science and society. From the base at UCLA, I also ran a large climate change program for the city, county, and agencies of Greater Los Angeles.

What is your current job? What path did you take to get there?

I am currently the Senior Director of Oceans at the XPRIZE Foundation (<http://www.xprize.org>). A colleague of mine had alerted me to the position and, feeling that I had reached the apogee of my effectiveness in the UCLA and Los Angeles positions, I decided to move on. This was a much more typical job search process, with résumés, interviews, and traditional references. And now I have an opportunity to engage scientists and engineers directly in innovating to solve critical challenges in our ocean.

What did your oceanographic education (or academic career) give you that is useful in your current job?

My scientific background in the ocean is critical to me doing my job well. The credibility that is brought by my background goes a long way in engaging global oceanographic experts. But I would say the most important things I bring to my current position are deep critical thinking skills and a broad ability to learn. My specific scientific expertise, while helpful in communicating the relevance of the challenges we launch at XPRIZE (for example, to incentivize breakthrough pH sensors for understanding ocean acidification),



is typically less relevant than the skills I gained in speaking credibly about the science involved, identifying and engaging the relevant experts, and building and running a large project.

This last aspect is one that most PhDs fail to appreciate as a significant capacity: completing a PhD means running a significant project, and it includes skills as diverse as fundraising, strategic planning, project management, staffing, speaking and writing, and leadership. These skills continue to be the most valuable ones I gained. And I encourage all PhDs to reflect on their experiences and recognize just how skilled they are relative to the capacities that most jobs require.

Is the job satisfying? What aspects of the job do you like best/least?

My job is immensely satisfying, while also completely exhausting. It involves a tremendous amount of creativity and leadership, which are really rewarding. But like anything, there is also a significant amount of day-to-day management and minutiae. The best part of my job involves two things: (1) getting to be a part of world-changing innovations, things that can truly address global grand challenges; and (2) working with dedicated and creative colleagues that come from every background and expertise imaginable. The worst part of my job is

simply that it requires so much effort and it is terribly hard to stop working at it—there just isn't enough time in the day.

Do you have any recommendations for new grads looking for jobs?

I have three recommendations. (1) Recognize that most scientists will not work in academia. Find the skills that you excel at as well as the elements that keep you excited, and find work that enables you to both employ your skills and enjoy your work. (2) Capitalize on the unbelievable skill set that you have attained in your education. In reality, an education in science (and especially a PhD) is light-years beyond what most people will ever achieve, in both knowledge and experience. Use this confidently. (3) Network, network, network. The best jobs, the best opportunities, and the best future all lie in the people you know and what they can do for you. Ask your friends, colleagues and mentors for help...they will give it. 🌐