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

I received my MS in marine biology and oceanography in 2005 from Università Politecnica delle Marche in Ancona (Italy), where I studied changes in the acoustic behavior of bottlenose dolphin in a controlled environment under external sources of anthropogenic disturbance. In 2004, I was selected under the Biodaqua exchange program between Canadian and European marine biology faculties for a three-month summer internship at the University of New Brunswick in Saint John to study the bioacoustics of the Weddell seal. After graduating, I continued to seek international research opportunities to broaden my professional skills and experience. In 2007, I volunteered in a Cape Town, South Africa, research project studying predator-prey relationships between white shark and Cape fur seal. I fell in love with South Africa and returned in the summer of 2008 for a two-month internship at Oceans Research in Mossel Bay to receive training in acoustic telemetry to study daily movements, behavior, and residency patterns of white shark. I then decided to return to academia to focus on shark acoustic telemetry, and earned my PhD in coastal resources management from East Carolina University (ECU) in 2013. There, I researched the international trade and fishery management of spiny dogfish and worked on providing alternative management strategies for the US North Atlantic stock.

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

Toward the end of my PhD, I was selected for the John A. Knauss Marine Policy Fellowship, and, basically, after graduation, left academia. In 2014, in pursuit of my fellowship, I moved to Washington, DC, to work at the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Office of Management and Budget. That was my first professional experience in the federal government, and it pretty much set the stage for my professional career from then on, first in the federal management of natural resources and then in the nonprofit sector.

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

My personal strategy for job hunting outside of academia (and this also works well in the university setting) is to keep my eyes open while networking, attending meetings and conferences, navigating the web extensively, and making a list of key people to contact regarding potential opportunities. My first job after graduating with my master's resulted from an email that I sent to a prominent Italian researcher whom I knew by name only and deeply admired. At the time, she had just been hired by a new nonprofit organization with a freshly funded grant (lucky me!), and after looking at my CV and background, she asked if I was interested in supporting her new work. Of course I said yes, and that opened the gate to possibilities for gaining professional experience in the world of marine conservation. Working with that team of researchers provided the opportunity to widen my skills and expand my research interests to new subjects, including fisheries management and policy, which I found extremely valuable for my professional career. That position also gave me the freedom to apply for summer internships, which aided me in developing a larger toolbox of skills. By the end of the grant, I was ready to make the jump overseas and, once again, by simply navigating the web and sending an introductory email describing my expertise and research interests to the right person at the right time, I found the professor who would become my PhD advisor at ECU.

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

Following the Knauss Fellowship, I was hired as a contractor at ERT Inc. to work at the NOAA Restoration Center in the Office of Habitat Conservation at NMFS headquarters. This job supported the development of restoration options for addressing the injuries to marine mammals and fishes caused by the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. This position gave me an incredible opportunity to work on an extremely sensitive management issue at the national level, and to gain further experience in the coordination and management of people.

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

I am currently the Marine Restoration Specialist at Ocean Conservancy's Gulf Restoration Program. A friend of mine sent me the link for the job application, as he thought I would be a perfect fit for that position. I was intrigued by the opportunity to return to the nonprofit sector while continuing to work

on marine restoration of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. I read the job ad, and I thought, "This is me they are looking for!" I applied and, luckily enough, they thought the same and hired me. And now I work to ensure that planning, projects, and initiatives for restoring the Gulf of Mexico marine and coastal resources injured by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill are guided by science, and that they include the marine environment as part of a broader restoration effort. An important component of my day-to-day job is to engage more directly with scientists and experts to create effective partnerships that can help to advance restoration efforts for marine resources in the Gulf.

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

My scientific background in marine and coastal ecosystems is essential to conducting my job effectively. The Gulf of Mexico is a complex ecosystem, with peculiar oceanographic features and a largely interlinked trophic web of coastal and marine species and habitats. My engagement with marine science and oceanography experts would be less effective if my scientific background were not as extensive. My education and training also provided me with critical thinking skill that is fundamental in identifying and engaging the key experts and stakeholders and in developing and implementing large restoration projects.

Is there any course or other training you would have liked to have had as part of your graduate education to meet the demands of the job market?

I would always students to take courses or training in economics and budget aspects of natural resources. These skills come in handy when writing project proposals and applying for grants. As a research scientist, I had to learn the hard way how to develop comprehensive budgets, strategic plans, and effective timelines. During my graduate career, taking more than one class in coastal and marine resource economics would have been really helpful to be more competitive in the current job market. Also, effective data analysis and synthesis is one of the major skills that employers seek. Therefore, I would strongly encourage students to take courses in computer programming for data analysis and to learn to use as many statistical methodologies and analytical techniques as possible. Similarly, being proficient in R and other similar programming languages would be really beneficial when applying for jobs, even outside of academia.

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

I find my job extremely satisfying. The aspect that I like the most is the direct engagement with multiple stakeholders, from scientists to fishermen. This gives me the opportunity to meet many people with different perspectives on the same issue. It is most instructive and rewarding to discuss an idea with experts driven by different passions and try to find the commonality that can help that idea to become a valuable project for all parties engaged in the process. The aspect of my job that I like the least is that sometimes developing an effective partnership requires compromising the original intent. However, the compromise is not necessarily a disadvantage if more people with different interests and backgrounds are then enticed to engage in the discussion and participate in innovative and effective solutions.

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

My main recommendation is to follow your passion, but at the same time not allow your passion to blind you when looking for jobs. My primary scientific passion has always been sharks, but I've never seen a position description for a "shark researcher" or a "shark scientist." As a student, it is important to understand that the species you are interested in should only be the vehicle to advance scientific research and understanding, while the scientific question behind the project has to be the main driver. Most, if not all, of my most rewarding experiences as a scientist have not been related to my shark studies but rather have dealt with fishery management in general. It is important to think outside the box and get out of your comfort zone. The scientific world is becoming evermore multidisciplinary. The job market is no longer looking for scientists with a specific expertise but instead for researchers with a breadth of skills who can navigate effectively across disciplines, from biology to social science. Students should put as much effort as they can into navigating multiple disciplines. In my experience, the key is to keep being passionate about what you do, but also to be open-minded and maintain a genuine curiosity. ⊘