

**KRIS McELWEE | Pacific Islands Coordinator, Marine Debris Program,
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**Degree: When, where, what,
and what in?**

I received my bachelor's degree in geology, with a French minor, from Case Western Reserve University in 1980. I went directly to graduate school at Oregon State University (OSU), and worked on a PhD until about 1987, but left without fulfilling all of the requirements. I later went back to OSU to get a master's degree in marine resource management (MRM), which I received in 2001.

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

I stayed at Oregon State University for a year after finishing my master's degree to continue as Assistant Director of Information Management for a USAID-funded international collaborative research program in aquaculture (I started with this program as a graduate research assistant).

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

I had prepared to continue working at my OSU job remotely when I moved to Hawai'i but instead was able to secure a job as a contractor with NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) before I left Oregon. I believe I heard about the job at NOAA through the MRM alumni mailing list.

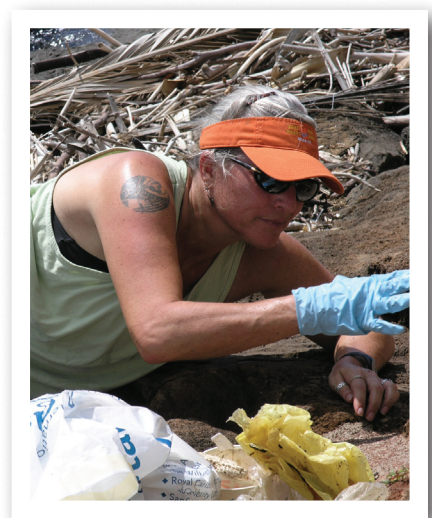
**Is this the only job (post-academia)
that you've had? If not, what else
did you do?**

I went straight from undergraduate to a doctoral program, planning to obtain a PhD before turning 25. While considering whether to drop out of that program, I worked as record store clerk, college radio station manager, and bartender. Once I left the doctoral program, I added country western DJ, Peace Corps volunteer (agroforestry in coastal Kenya), print shop monkey, library page, and bassoon reed maker to my resume.

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

I have been Pacific Islands Coordinator for the NOAA Marine Debris Program, at varying percentages of my time, since the program was created in 2005. I coordinate marine debris activities with NOAA offices, other federal agencies, and state and territory representatives in Hawai'i, American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. I also led the conference and steering committees for the Fifth International Marine Debris Conference. I helped coordinate the Hawai'i Marine Debris Action Plan, led the post-tsunami marine debris assessment and removal mission to American Samoa, and have participated in marine debris cruises to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and the North Pacific subtropical convergence zone.

Before joining the Marine Debris Program, I coordinated NOAA's coral



reef, oil spill response, habitat restoration, coastal management training, and outreach activities in the Pacific Islands.

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

My credibility with the scientific community (within and outside of NOAA) is almost entirely thanks to my oceanographic education: my research, oceanography core courses, and advanced chemistry courses. My comfort with and understanding of the policy side of the house had its beginnings in the MRM courses in coastal zone policy and ocean and coastal law. I also benefited tremendously from my internship project, working with the national oceanographic institute in Senegal, where I learned flexibility, resourcefulness, and an appreciation for well-stocked labs, and developed an abiding interest in working with developing economies. Being editor of the OSU

College of Oceanic and Atmospheric Sciences newsletter *Streamlines* honed my writing and editing skills, which come in handy every day. Finally, by helping out at an early PISCO (Partnership for Interdisciplinary Studies of Coastal Oceans) workshop, I was introduced to facilitation and flipcharts, both of which I use on a regular basis.

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

My position is immensely satisfying. I work with people from a broad range of disciplines and sectors on a problem that has captured the interest of both the public and the scientific and policy communities. I am able to get out in the field from time to time, work on legislation, help groups with strategic planning, engage in the peer review process, and develop good relationships with marine debris professionals across the country and the world.

I've particularly enjoyed focusing our program's attention on at-sea detection of derelict fishing gear, organizing an international conference, and blogging from research and marine debris removal cruises. I'm not so crazy about keeping up with the bureaucracy, particularly updating our project database. It's sometimes frustrating being in Hawai'i when most of my colleagues are on the East and West Coasts, which means I see them in person only twice a year and spend an inordinate amount of time on conference calls.

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

Look beyond academia! Local, state, and federal government agencies have opportunities, as do nongovernmental organizations. Talk to your professors but also ask them for contacts outside the university. Find out what people do every day. I had little idea that NOAA existed before I graduated and even less understanding of the type of work NOAA employees do. 📧