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

After earning my bachelor of science degree in integrative biology at the University of Florida in 2006, I took stock of my undergraduate experience and decided to take my skills to the Florida Keys, where I worked as a marine fisheries scientist with the State of Florida. I sought any opportunity to be out on the water and joined in loads of local conservation initiatives, dealing mostly with wild-life conservation. Having spent a large part of my childhood in the Keys, it was particularly eye-opening to see how the reefs and fish populations were changing so rapidly. I wanted to learn more about the issues I was noticing out on the water, so in 2009, I joined the Marine Resource Assessment Program at the University of South Florida's College of Marine Science. My dissertation work focused on tracking the habitat use of fishes throughout Florida's Tampa Bay Estuary using otolith chemistry. As an innovative tagging technique in the area, I had plenty of reasons to engage with experts around the world to establish protocols and was responsible for designing and managing a dedicated otolith chemistry lab throughout my PhD track. I earned my PhD in marine science in 2014.

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

I did not. While I loved the scientific process and all of the related tasks like grant writing, manuscript preparation, and conference presentation, it became clear to me early on that the higher up the academic ladder I climbed, the more distant I seemed to become from the outdoor environments and issues that initially drew me to the field of marine science.

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

I took note of the things that made me happy throughout my dissertation research. I traveled quite a bit to speak at conferences, always cherishing the moments speaking with other scientists and getting excited about what the data meant and what analyses to perform next. And wherever I went, I explored as much as possible—the outdoors made me happy and made me want to do more to help understand and conserve our natural world. It was on a conference trip to Iceland in 2012 that it really clicked: my challenge was to find a way to merge my love for research science with my desire to directly engage people in outdoor experiential adventures so that they, too, would feel that same happy feeling and want to contribute to a collective effort to help. I was still finishing my last year of dissertation work when I launched my ecotourism business in 2013.

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

Immediately following graduation, I accepted a research associate position with the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission to continue research on juvenile fish habitat, my focus for the year following my graduation. At the same time, I was continuing to sprout my career in the marine ecotourism business.

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

I currently own and operate Happy Paddler Kayak Tours & EcoVentures, an award-winning ecotourism business on the southwest coast of Florida focused on



providing deeply engaging ecotour services and professional paddling courses. Since launching the business in 2013, Happy Paddler has earned an outstanding reputation in the outdoor adventure tourism industry (e.g., 100% five-star traveler reviews, consecutive TripAdvisor's Certificates of Excellence). My work specifically involves providing interpretive tours of the Sarasota Bay marine habitats, coordinating citizen science projects in collaboration with community organizations, and cultivating relationships with surrounding communities to extend our services into various private and public-sector markets. My science background has become a prominent feature in the business, and I've written several successful grants to help fund the incorporation of citizen science projects into the ecotours. These projects involve global microplastics research, horseshoe crab monitoring, and stewardship awareness initiatives, and all are simple enough that almost anyone can participate. This is especially rewarding, because it not only satisfies my love of research but also fully engages others in actively contributing to the field of marine science.

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

My academic path has helped me build a strong background in marine research with lots of practice in collaborative project design and plenty of experience effectively communicating science to diverse audiences. As is natural in any dissertation work, I had to find creative solutions for a diverse set of issues and had to defend those solutions with strength and confidence. Perhaps most importantly, I learned so much about my “style” of contributing to the field of marine science.

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?

Although it’s a skill that is inherently part of life as a grad student, additional exposure to project collaboration would be a plus in any academic career. Building expertise in a highly specialized area of research is extremely valuable, but more so when done in a collaborative setting.

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

Absolutely. It’s extremely rewarding to have a vision of success and to follow that vision through to a beautiful reality. I love operating the business as one big research project—always testing, evolving, and improving every aspect as needed. Every day is different, and I’m constantly expanding my expertise into diverse areas such as website design, wilderness first aid, employee management, wildlife interpretation, drone photography, graphic design, and, of course, paddling. It is a very full-time job, with no promises of vacation time, no benefits package, and no guarantee that weather, environmental health, and the state of the tourism economy will hold out. These can definitely create a little insecurity—but the rewards of this career always come out on top.

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

Be creative in finding ways to apply yourself in your field. Accept every opportunity for experiential learning, and apply for every award or grant possible. And have fun! ☺