

Shelby Walker | Director, Oregon Sea Grant, shelby.walker@oregonstate.edu

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

I completed a PhD in 2003 at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, where I focused on organic contaminant geochemistry. Essentially, I looked at the fate and distribution of contaminants in urban estuaries. I was a Sea Grant Knauss Fellow at the National Science Foundation toward the end of my dissertation.

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

Following graduate school, I competed for and received a National Research Council Research Associateship that places postdocs in government labs, among others. I worked with the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL) Chemistry Division, based at the Washington, DC, facility. This postdoc was about as close back to academia that I got until I took my current Sea Grant position.

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

It's safe to say that I wouldn't be where I am now without the Sea Grant Knauss Fellowship. It opened doors that I didn't even know existed. During my second postdoc year, I had begun to realize that a purely research endeavor wasn't really for me and was thinking about other opportunities. I had remained friends with my fellowship mentor, and when she alerted me about an interagency research planning effort, I seized the opportunity. I was pleased to become the project manager for the Ocean Research Priorities Plan and Implementation Strategy (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/nstc-orppis.pdf>), a decadal plan for ocean research in the United States, published in January 2007 and intended to reflect national

priorities and societal needs. A team effort, it was created by the 25 federal agencies that comprise the Joint Subcommittee on Ocean Science and Technology.

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

I've had several jobs since completing my PhD, each different from one another and all very challenging. After the *Ocean Research Priorities Plan and Implementation Strategy* was published, I returned to the National Science Foundation as a program officer, responsible for management and oversight of the planning and development for the \$400 million Ocean Observatories Initiative (OOI; <http://oceanobservatories.org>). OOI was a project 20 years in the making, and it was my responsibility to help move it through final planning and review stages for approval by NSF's National Science Board. Once OOI was approved and moving into construction, it was again time for me to move on. This time, I went to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, where I applied my strategic planning background (gained from my work on the *Ocean Research Priorities Plan*) in the Office of Policy, Planning and Evaluation in the Oceanic and Atmospheric Research (OAR) Line Office. While my tasks initially focused on large-scale strategic planning in the agency context, less than a year into my position, the Deepwater Horizon event occurred in the Gulf of Mexico. I was involved in the response to the disaster and subsequent planning for restoration and development of the science needed to address some of the longer term issues facing the Gulf, which occupied much of my time until my ultimate departure from NOAA.



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

I am currently the Director of Oregon Sea Grant. After 12 years working in Washington, DC, it was time for a different pace and venue. I also wanted to get a bit closer to the science and its application in solving problems. The Sea Grant mission combines research, education, extension, and communications to address coastal and marine issues—essentially first identifying then understanding the issues that face our coastal ecosystems and communities and subsequently bringing to bear the science required to help inform decisions about them.

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

While I've acquired most of the skills that I use on a day-to-day basis since my time in graduate school, I did get a great education in critical thinking and creative solutions. Fieldwork often requires adjustments on the fly without a lot of resources, and the ability to anticipate a problem and come up with a solution is a skill that I've taken with me from job to job.

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

My job is very satisfying. I get to work with people who are immensely passionate about what they do, from extension agents who live and work in communities to researchers who bring their scientific curiosity to bear in examining pressing issues. It's fun being back in an academic environment, which is very different from the federal government. There's more latitude when it comes to collaboration, supporting new ideas, and innovation.

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

I would encourage new grads to think broadly. The academic path is the right one for a lot of people, but even that career is evolving. Research funding agencies are focusing more and more on the utility of science, which wasn't (isn't) always something taught or learned in graduate school. Federal service was a great path for me for a long time, whether it was "official" at NOAA or just connected through my work with the federal agencies on the priorities plan. Staying curious and open-minded about possibilities is key. 