

**STEPHANIE WEAR | Senior Scientist and Strategy Advisor,
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**Degree: When, where, what,
and what in?**

I earned my BA in environmental science from the University of Virginia in 1996, my master's in marine sciences from the University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill, in 2000, and my PhD in marine Sciences from UNC Chapel Hill in 2015.

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

No. I had originally intended to get a PhD and go the academic route when I started graduate school, but after taking my comps and completing course work, my advisor moved to a new university. I had the choice of following my advisor and starting over or finishing up and seeing what I could do with a master's degree. I opted for the latter. I didn't return to school to complete my PhD for another 13 years, but fortunately when I did, my credits and requirements were satisfied so I was able to finish very quickly. I hadn't really planned to return for a PhD because my career was very satisfying, and I had been able to get the positions I sought—but then things evolved, and getting my PhD made sense.

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

After earning my master's, I wasn't really sure if I wanted to go into conservation, education, or government work. There were not many job options when I was looking in 2000, so I had to get strategic. I took a job doing GIS work for a health research project that I saw as a placeholder, something I wasn't really interested in so that I didn't get stuck in it (inertia tends to get the best of us). So, during

about eight months in that job, I explored all sorts of possibilities, applied for many of them, and saved money. I found that without any experience, it was difficult to land a job, and I wasn't sure what would be interesting and fun. I was offered some positions in outreach and education, but they were not "career" jobs, and I turned them down. I kept looking and finally found a couple of unpaid internships and volunteer opportunities in the US Virgin Islands. I had enough savings to scrape by and keep my student loans from defaulting, so I headed to the Virgin Islands for what was supposed to be three or four months. I didn't know anything about conservation and was hoping to learn. It was baptism by fire—and I was hooked. I loved the work. I loved the people. I loved the place and the challenge, so I stayed. After about five months, I took a full-time position with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in 2001 and have been working there ever since.

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

Besides my eight-month stint working on that GIS project, I have been a lifer at The Nature Conservancy.

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

I am a senior scientist and strategy advisor on our Global Science Team. The path I took to my current job was always guided by one question: "Will it be fun?" I chose an internship in the Caribbean over a paid position in Rhode Island. I chose a global job that would teach me about the world. I chose working with engaging people in interesting places with a little



bit of adventure sprinkled in here and there. I often get asked how I got to my position, and to be sure, there is no tried and true way of getting to any job in the environmental space. It was a serendipitous adventure! I started as an intern, then took a position as a protected area specialist that evolved into running the conservation programs for the Virgin Islands and Eastern Caribbean Program. Next, I ran a global coral reef and climate change project, and that evolved into becoming Director of Coral Reef Conservation. At some point in the middle there, I started doing spokesperson work on all topics ocean and nature for TNC. Then I burned out because, well, I go overboard sometimes. So, I stepped back, got my PhD, and now I work on ocean pollution and continue to do spokesperson work for TNC.

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

My training in oceanography has been the foundation for all of my work. I often say my work is about people, and that is very true. But the ocean science background I have is so important as we work to determine the best strategies, how we measure success, and what sort of questions to ask. It generally helps to have a good understanding of how the system you are working to protect works.

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 encourage students to find ways to get real-world experience outside graduate school and textbook learning. For example, supporting ongoing conservation work, either directly through your studies or in addition to them, will help you better understand the realities of the work as well as begin to build your network before graduation.

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

I have been at TNC for 19 years, so I would say, my job is satisfying, to be sure. I knew from the beginning that I would stick around for a long time. There are so many things I love about my job that it is hard to list them, but I would start with the awesome people of TNC. It is very cool to work in a mission-driven environment with people who share your values. I also have loved the diversity of the work—which is pretty much thanks to how messed up our planet is, so I guess that is a mixed bag. The challenge is intense, and there are a million opportunities to be creative and entrepreneurial. In terms of what I like the least, it is really hard to say no, and it feels impossible at times because everything feels important and urgent. Discipline is required to stay sane. I am not very disciplined and have had a few periods of burnout because of it. I always feel like I need a bigger team to get the job done. But I have learned to be efficient and to maximize the resources available—good life lessons.

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

My advice is to seek jobs that you think you will enjoy, that will be fun, because you are going to spend a lot of time doing them. Be open to a range of possibilities because there really is no single path to the job of your dreams, and as long as you keep that intent front and center, you will find your way there. I very much believe in the power of setting intentions and then allowing nature to take its course. ☺