

Rolling with the tide: A career in marine biology

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PhD

Photo-identification of whale tails formed a core component of my PhD work in Oman. To this day I love almost nothing more than the thrill of finding a match and establishing that an individual whale has been re-sighted, either in the same location where it was photographed the year before or separated by as much as 15 years and/or hundreds of kilometres.



Gianna Minton has been a marine biologist for nearly 20yrs.

In this article she describes how she created and maintained that career, starting afresh in every country she relocated to for her husband's work.

‘You’re so lucky,’ people often tell me when I talk about my work in the field of whale and dolphin conservation.

People usually mean that I am lucky to have something I am passionate about and to be working despite multiple moves dictated by my husband's career with Shell.

I do feel lucky, but it is only one element of what it has taken to do what I do and get paid for it.

My ‘career’ has been a patchwork of different, sometimes seemingly unrelated jobs and learning opportunities. They all came together in my current position as a consultant for WWF, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the International Whaling Commission.

My undergraduate and master's degrees were a combination of Human Biology and Education. The first 10 years of my working life were dedicated to the field of education. I thought I had rooted myself firmly in that arena until 1997 when Keith and I moved to Oman.

OMAN

Inspired by the amazing snorkelling, diving and marine life along the stunning coastline, I spent six years following distance education courses, guiding dolphin-watching tours and conducting boat-based whale and dolphin research.

“there are days I desperately miss being on a boat”

Most of this work was unpaid, and involved long hours on fund-raising, logistics and data analysis with just a few exhilarating weeks each year spent looking for whales at sea.



By the time we left Oman in 2005, I had a 14-month-old baby and a PhD in whale and dolphin ecology and conservation (facilitated in great part by the Shell Voluntary Spouse Assistance programme).

MALAYSIA

Despite being armed with new credentials (Dr Minton!), it took two years to find the right combination of funding and institutional support to launch a dolphin research project in my new home.

During the interim, I continued to support the research I had left behind in Oman, and took on contract work, comparing photographs of humpback whale tail flukes from catalogues.

My second daughter was 18 months old, by the time the proposals and presentations I had made to corporate sponsors, NGOs, and other funding bodies, had resulted in the launch of the **Sarawak Dolphin Project**.

I had a salaried position at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, and would guide Cindy, a young and talented local student, towards her MSc.



Over the next five years, I worked mostly from home in Miri, with monthly trips to research sites and/or my office at the university.

Cindy was joined by two more MSc candidates. Together we conducted boat surveys and interviews with coastal communities, hosted workshops to raise awareness of dolphin conservation and attended conferences to share our work and expertise.

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By the time our family left Miri in 2012, our research team had published four papers, my students were qualified, and the programme was both recognised and secure.

One of my proudest moments was watching Cindy receive an award for the best presentation (SE Asia) at the Society for Marine Mammalogy conference 2015.

GABON

Leaving Miri was a wrench for the whole family. We were happy with work, school, our friends, and the wildlife around us in the Shell camp. Little did we know that Gabon would offer us all a lot more.

Professionally, this transition was smoother. The long lead time required for Keith to get his work permit, coupled with my experience in my field, allowed me to line up a job with WWF Gabon as their Marine Programme Coordinator.

In September 2012 I hit the ground running, working 30 hours a week from the ramshackle WWF office in the town of Gamba, 7km from the more manicured Shell camp.

It was a steep learning curve, my responsibilities included managing a marine turtle monitoring project and studying coastal and inland fisheries in addition to whales and dolphins.

Despite that it took several months before an offer from Shell to use one of their transport vessels allowed us to conduct monthly coastal surveys.



During this time, I again had the privilege of working with a young, highly motivated and capable local ‘assistant’, who was able to continue the programme after I left.

Recently he was hired by the national parks agency to run two neighbouring coastal and marine parks. We are still in touch on a weekly basis, and I was thrilled to learn that he will now be pursuing a PhD in whale and dolphin conservation in Gabon.



In 2015, our oldest daughter began secondary school. It was time to leave the elephants and monkeys in our garden in Gamba and take up residence in a more cosmopolitan setting where we could be together as a family as the girls started the next phase of their education.



THE HAGUE

Keith secured a posting in The Hague. While it is a coastal location, I realized quite quickly that after years of accumulating knowledge and experience in more remote locations, it would not be realistic for me to jump into the northern European cetacean research scene, where well-established projects focused on species and environments that were less familiar to me.

I wondered how I could put the experience and contacts that I had accumulated over the years to good use.



Not long after I arrived, a colleague from WWF Netherlands contacted me about a short-term feasibility study.

To take on this consultancy contract, he advised I simply needed to register with the Dutch Chamber of Commerce (Kamer van Koophandel). Then I could take on any consulting work anywhere in the world.

I followed these instructions, and while the tax and VAT reporting requirements of running a consultancy are more complicated than the registration, it has proved to be a viable, and rewarding new phase of work.

Over time I have established my reputation and now work full time. I travel around the world for conferences and workshops related to whale and dolphin conservation. Despite this there is always the insecurity of not knowing what will fill the gap when a contract comes to its end.

Whilst there are days I desperately miss being on a boat photographing whales in the tropical sun, I truly enjoy the more regional and global work I am doing now, writing grant proposals, guidelines and strategies, designing websites, and facilitating workshops. Every day brings new challenges, interesting opportunities, and ways to connect the dots from experiences in my past.

Returning to the way that others perceive my journey:

Am I lucky?

Well, yes – but I think to a great extent we create our own luck by rolling with the tide - adapting to the opportunities at hand, and diving in to make the most of them whenever we can.