

Chasing my Dream

How I finally got my dream PhD

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After finishing my MSc in Advanced Biological Sciences, I knew I wanted to carry on looking into animal physiology, specifically in respiratory physiology. However, there were very few PhD programmes on offer that were even slightly related to what I wanted to study. I applied for PhD studentships in projects that I knew I wasn't completely engaged in and some had absolutely nothing to do with what I wanted to study. I just felt compelled to complete a Doctorate, any PhD course, I had to stay in research. After many failed attempts to get onto a course, I made a drastic decision. With no assurance of entering the scientific industry, I moved to where the animals I wanted to study are, Australia.

Before my MSc, I worked aboard research vessels looking at cetaceans. I'm fascinated by marine animals, but I'm obsessed with one group, in particular, sharks. I feel as though they are possibly the most misunderstood animals on the planet. Sharks are so unjustly demonized by Hollywood and the media to the point where masses of people have irrational fears of giant great white sharks in public swimming pools, c'est la vie. Instead of resigning myself to defeat, I decided to double down on my dream of becoming a marine biologist and booked a one-way plane ticket down under.

In February of 2018, I left Liverpool and arrived in Perth's summer. I found a job in a bar to keep me going while I tried to figure out where my life was going. I contacted many universities around the state, and I did some volunteer work with Bottlenose dolphins with a university research group. While out on a cetacean boat survey, we travelled past a sandy bay and a marina full of boats. The bay was part of the University of Western Australia (UWA) main campus, WA's most prestigious university, I knew that's where I needed to go.

The thought of applying to the state's top university was daunting and I was aware of the research produced by this institution, being a shark fanatic myself. Nevertheless, I was inspired and I contacted everyone I could in the marine biology and oceans institute. I eventually got to meet Professor Jessica Meeuwig, and I presented my proposal for my research. Within one month of our meeting, I was spending the beginning of August in the Indian Ocean working for Professor Meeuwig's 'Marine Futures Lab'. Throughout this time I had no access to my emails, and I was waiting to find out if my PhD application was successful. Fortunately, this time it was.



I'm currently in my final year as a PhD candidate at UWA in the Marine Futures Lab. I've been researching how the world's warming oceans affect fish (including sharks), and how we can predict the severity of the outcome. I have some of the smartest minds in the world of marine ecology and biology on my committee which I'm extremely grateful for. However, I'd be lying if I said it's been easy. The PhD experience is different for each candidate, however, the unifying trial we all go through seems to be 'failure', research is not easy. As failure is a universal experience to PhD candidates, then resilience must be a trait in successful candidates. It was resilience, I later learned, that earned me a place in the lab.

The past few years have been so extraordinary. I have spent several weeks at sea aboard research vessels, swimming with and taking blood samples from sharks. I have landed in a seaplane in the middle of the ocean, spent a month aboard a superyacht, stayed overnight on



an airstrip in the bush, and I'm the first scouser to reach a small island north of Australia consisting of a tiny airstrip, surrounded by a reef! I also figured out sleeping is not considered a priority when in the field with some 16-hour workdays, you nap when you get the chance!

I love what I do, it is everything I've ever wanted - It feels cool to say that. So, I guess if you're in the same position I was in, when everything seems against you, don't give up. If you know what you want, don't stop until you've got it. Be resilient. ■

