

## My story

# Esther Wozniak

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*Esther recounts growing up in Suva and progressing from the University of the South Pacific to her present position in the International Fisheries Team of the Pew Charitable Trusts in Washington DC. She provides some career advice for young fishery professionals from Pacific Island countries and territories.*

### My background

I was born in Suva in 1991 and went to Dudley High School. My dad had a houseboat in Lami (just outside Suva) and fished commercially for albacore. My mom lived by a river in Wailekutu so, if I wasn't in school, I was handline fishing. As a ten-year old, this meant catching small prawns near mangrove swamps to use as bait. Sometimes we would take a rowboat out to the reef and try to catch *sabutu* (yellow-tailed emperor), *kabatia* (thumbprint emperor) and the prized *kawakawa* (grouper). Whatever fish we caught, we had to scale, gut and fully clean; in fact, my cousins and I would see who could clean their fish the quickest and bring it to my mum for inspection. This experience taught me to respect and fully appreciate the fish on our table.

Growing up in a family in which most of the men were traditional fishers turned commercial fishers, and most of the women hand-line fished every day, I always knew I would do something later in life related to fisheries. Much to my Bu's (grandmother) dismay, I chose to study marine science over medicine – but it was one of the best decisions I've ever made.

### University and my first jobs

I studied marine science and management at the University of the South Pacific (USP) and interned at the IUCN Oceania Regional Office. While studying, I was elected USP's student representative for science, technology and environment. I worked with students, faculty and local NGOs to help bridge student volunteer and internship opportunities. I also led one of the first groups of Fijian youths to Japan for the Kizuna Project to aid in the 2011 tsunami recovery and there I learned about disaster preparedness.

My favourite lecturer at USP was Mr Johnson Seeto; he is still the best teacher I have ever had. He was funny, engaging and had a wealth of knowledge – he knew how to identify *any* marine species. My favourite tutor was Alifereti Koroilavesau, who helped my class get through our labs and really tried to meet each student at their own level. He was like that big brother you could go to with all your course questions and trust that he would give you the right advice.



After my time at USP and the brief internship at IUCN, I found that many of the jobs in the region were already occupied by expatriates with more experience than I had. Very few folks from my graduating class were able to find jobs in the field and those that did had very low paying ones. So, I moved to the US with my now husband, who was a Peace Corp volunteer in Ra Province, Fiji, and had landed his dream job as an Environmental Engineer at the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, D.C. We told each other we were going to do this for 5 to 7 years and then find our way back to Fiji.

The move to the US was hard. Fiji was all I knew and all I was. Fijian is my first language and I still think in Fijian before all the mental gymnastics to translate it to “American English.” I come from a family of over a hundred people – so Washington, D.C. felt like a very cold place in more ways than one. I luckily joined a local community of Pacific Islanders and have since built my own little village with friends from all over the place.

Within a few months of moving to the US, I obtained my employment authorisation card and began working at an aquatic lab at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. After a brief stint at a renewable energy company, I was encouraged by my husband to apply for a job at Pew. It was then that I finally found my way back to the marine conservation and fisheries world.

I joined Pew's global shark conservation team in 2017 and led efforts in the Pacific region to manage and conserve sharks and rays. During this time, I got to work with the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), Fiji's Ministry of Fisheries and other folks in the Pacific region. I felt like I was making my way back



home. One of the best parts of the job was travelling to Samoa and Fiji a couple of times a year. As part of the shark team, I helped coordinate regional workshops and support Pacific Island countries and territories at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). In 2019, this contributed to a huge win – the regulation of the trade in 18 species of sharks and rays with depleted populations under CITES.

Working on sharks in the Pacific was a dream job, but I yearned for the day I would be able to do this job from home, my actual home. I grew up listening to stories about “Dakuwaqa”, the shark god who protects fishermen out at sea. My grandmother was an expert storyteller and used to share all the legends about Dakuwaqa and Robotidua, the octopus god. This instilled within me a lot of respect for sharks and other marine creatures. I was really upset to learn about how vast the shark fin trade was, especially in the Pacific, from longlining. This really motivated my work on shark conservation.

After the CITES win, I joined Pew’s international fisheries team. As a principal associate on the team, I now work to reform high seas longline fishing by improving transshipment regulation and monitoring (including through electronic monitoring) of longline fisheries. I focus on advocacy efforts within countries, with regional fisheries management organisations, and with United Nations agencies to ensure the sustainability of global fisheries.

## Mentors and struggles

In addition to Mr Johnson Seeto and Mr Alifereti Koroilavesau, I have had other mentors such as Angelo Villagomez, the only other Pacific Islander who works at Pew. He is from Saipan and has worked at Pew for over 13 years, and constantly encourages me to bring my authentic self to work every day. In a way, Bob Gillett and Francisco Blaha have also been mentors, as I try to learn what I can in all our interactions.

Coming from Fiji and then working at a US NGO, I get what I call “imposter syndrome” every single day. Surrounded by experts, I constantly struggle to articulate my ideas and improve my writing skills. In the past couple of years, I have taken it upon myself to really push for increased engagement in the Pacific. I have recommended folks who I studied with at USP for jobs and they have all the right qualifications and Indigenous background knowledge but they might not have the visa privileges of someone fresh out of university in the US or London and that really bothers me. So many NGOs and donors are based in developed countries like the US and Europe, yet they have campaigns or projects focused in areas like the Pacific – so I often wonder why their staffing does not reflect the areas where they work. I understand the immigration regulations can make this difficult but there has to be a way to work with the system, especially now in the remote-working world.

## Advice to aspiring Pacific Island fishery professionals

The most important advice I could give is to find mentors: the opportunities for Pacific Island fishery professionals are expanding, but it is a complex field and a helping hand could be very useful. Never stop learning – I try to carve out time from my daily 9–5 job for learning opportunities. I recently completed a Harvard online business course on management and am trying to always equip myself for the next step in my career trajectory.

I urge aspiring Pacific Island fishery professionals to find volunteer opportunities, internships and networking engagements while you are still at USP. These can help you build connections to get to your first job.

If I had to re-do my education and career advancement, what would I change? I wish I had applied to join Pew sooner. I did not think a bachelor’s degree was enough to get me a job like this. I limited myself to what I thought I was qualified for, but once I joined Pew, I worked (and still work) really hard.

A last bit of advice concerns writing. Besides courses that a young fisheries professional could take at USP, it is so important to acquire one specific skill: writing. Work on your writing ALL THE TIME. Take extra writing courses at USP and afterwards, and always ask for constructive criticism.