Jennifer Le
PhD Candidate, Marine Biology Research Division, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UCSD

Jennifer is currently a first-year, biological oceanography PhD student in Lisa Levin’s lab. With a background in both ecology and economics, she is also part of the CMBC PIER (Program for Interdisciplinary Environmental Research) program. Jennifer is studying deep-sea ecosystem services: the natural processes and the value society puts on them. She’s hoping to integrate her science into future management and policy decisions, but she views herself as still a baby scientist in the never-ending process of learning.

What inspired you to work in your current field?
I’m currently a PhD student at SIO studying processes in the deep sea and how society benefits from them. What inspires me is how the human system and the natural environment interact with each other. It’s a continual loop of cause-and-effect because behind every environmental issue is a social one and it’s impossible to separate them. At the end of the day, I hope to use my science as a platform for, not only scientific knowledge, but also social change.

Please describe the path that led you to where you are now:
When I started as an undergrad at UCSD, I had no idea what I wanted to do and
never expected to go to graduate school. My major required an internship, so I started volunteering in a lab at SIO. I really enjoyed being part of the research process and wanted to start conducting my own. Once that decision was made, I catered my professional experiences to make me a strong candidate: rigorous coursework, interdisciplinary research, teaching assistant jobs, and work abroad. Then, I applied to graduate school and am now a baby scientist.

What experiences helped prepare you for your career?
I am only getting started with my career in science but I think there’s something to be gained from all experiences, even ones that seem irrelevant. Directing a dance team helped me fit small details into the big picture. Working abroad helped me realize the importance of communication and engagement. Of course, volunteering in the lab helped me lay a foundation as a scientist too, but it’s all about perspective.

Please share any funny/inspiring stories or favorite things about your career:
During one of my first cruises, we had to sort through everything we caught in the trawl. Things that don’t move too much like urchins are fine. But sorting through the fish is a little disconcerting; they have faces and they twitch when you touch them. At first, I just sifted my index finger through the buckets to search. And then, my lab mate asked me how I was doing and I turned around to see her grasping a flopping fish in her hand with the most stoic face ever. I eventually grew desensitized too.

Do you have advice for middle school and high school students interested in a career in science?
Do well in school, ask lots of questions, and don’t be afraid of failure. Take every opportunity you can and make opportunities where you want them. A career in science is a lot of hard work but it’s definitely worth it.

Are there any resources you would recommend for students looking at a career in ocean and earth science, especially at UCSD and SIO?
UCSD and SIO are huge research institutions and have a bunch of opportunities to get involved in research. When I was looking to volunteer, I looked up current research being done and sent emails to labs that interested me. They’re always looking for help so it’s mostly a matter of persistence and dedication.

Favorite quote?
“The only difference between screwing around and science is writing it down.”
– Adam Savage (MythBusters)