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FROM WETSUIT TO PIN STRIPE: The evolution of an ocean policymaker

By Elizabeth Beiring Kim

Have you ever been scuba diving for so long—and gotten so cold—that you had to pee in your wetsuit just to keep warm? For a few years during grad school, that was part of my daily summer routine while living on a tiny sand spit of an island in the Caribbean studying the romantic lives of corals. It was a small piece of paradise, made with sugar cane walls and a tin roof, and surrounded by vibrant tropical reefs.

As appealing as that and the underwater wonders of the world's coral reefs are, I traded it all in after finishing a joint law degree and Ph.D. to sit behind a desk in Washington, D.C. I work in the Oceans and Coastal Protection Division of the US Environmental Protection Agency, where I lead EPA's programs on cruise ship discharges and ocean dumping management.

Sure, the job is glamorous (like touring a sewage treatment plant in the belly of a cruise ship at port) and high-paying (after just 10 years I earn well over half what a first-year attorney makes), but that's not why I do it. On a planet of over 6 billion people, I am one of the luckiest. Protecting the environment is my way of repaying the fates.

How did I get here? A long and winding road from the Honors Program! After a very rewarding undergrad career at UB studying psychology and biology, I started a Ph.D. at Berkeley in cognitive science. After my first year, I knew that I did not want to be a professor. So I came back to Buffalo—and to my teacher, mentor, and friend, Dr. Herreid—for a year of thinking and working.

That was when the idea of protecting the oceans gelled, motivated by an article I'd read about Kathryn Fuller, then head of World Wildlife Fund-U.S., who was trained as both an attorney and a marine scientist. That seemed like an excellent combination to me.

So I went back to graduate school and law school... at the same time. And once more, UB opened its arms to me. With a great deal of support from the Law School,



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the Biology Department, and my Ph.D. advisor, Howard Lasker, I finished this nontraditional combination after eight long, hard years. Along the way, I met my future husband, Kiho, who remains a card-carrying marine biologist as a professor of biology and environmental studies at American University.

For reasons I could never identify, my goal throughout grad school was to work at EPA. (I have since learned that some people are just born to regulate.) After I finished both degrees, I landed my dream job at EPA. And fortunately, by the time Kiho realized I wasn't going to take a high-paying legal job, we were already married.

While being this highly overeducated is not a prerequisite for my job, having exper-

tise in both science and law gives me have a unique bilingual perspective and allows me to play the intellectual field, dividing my time among scientific studies, technical guidance, legal analyses, policy making, legislative drafting, and even international negotiations. And it seems to make my bosses happy.

Now Kiho and I have two small marine biologists of our own. We spent last summer in Puerto Rico, where I taught them the trick about peeing in your wetsuit and renewed my love of the reefs through their wondering eyes. I hope, for their sakes, I can repay my debt to the fates.