

All in a Day's Work

Rachael Shreeve – Marine Biologist

PROFILE

Rachael studied Marine Biology at Newcastle University, which is where she developed a passion for plankton. From there she went to Sherkin Island Marine Station where she worked on the plankton projects. After this she moved on to work for the British Antarctic Survey (BAS), and has been there for the last 14 years and it is there that she obtained her doctorate.



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What is the worst thing about your job?

Anything that keeps me away from the microscope, such as meetings, office work and management work.

What is the best bit of advice you have ever had?

At school I was put off taking up this career by teachers, who thought that there were few jobs in marine biology going and even fewer for women. But one careers advisor said 'if you want to do something just go for it. You will get there'. I have never forgotten this, and apply this to everything I want these days. It is amazing how far hard work and persistence will take you.

A Day in the Life of Rachael Shreeve

When did you first become interested in marine biology?

As a child I loved nothing better than to play on a beach, just as most children do! I would poke around in rock pools and just generally had fun. This laid the foundations for the rest of my life. As a teenager I took an interest in sharks, whales and seals, and decided I would like to work on these when I grew up. I worked hard and went to university and in my final year there, I really discovered plankton. Plankton are all the tiny plants and animals that float about in the sea, which although you can hardly see with a naked eye, are the bottom of the food chain. This means everything else that lives in the sea, like fish, sharks and whales depend on them, just as we on land depend on things like grass and sheep. I have been fascinated by plankton ever since.



Above: The RRS James Clark Ross



What is your favourite animal?

Baby crab or baby starfish.

Where does the work take you?

Mostly to the Antarctic. Ten months of the year I work at the BAS Headquarters in Cambridge, in the UK, spending the other two months on board our research ship, the RRS James Clark Ross, working at sea in the Southern Ocean, Antarctica. This year I have also spent three weeks in Peru, South America, teaching students out there about Antarctic plankton, and two weeks in Sweden, working on a pilot project for use in the Antarctic next year.

What is the best thing about your job?

Collecting plankton samples, and looking at them for the first time. You never know what you might find in them. It is like Christmas every day!

What is a typical day at sea like?

We work, play and sleep on the ship for up to two months at a time. The ship works all hours, so a working 'day' may actually mean working through the night. This is when it is easiest to catch animals. Things often break on the ship, which have to be mended before you can carry on, and bad weather may throw the ship all over the place, stopping work. Mostly though we get up and get to work straight away. It might be your turn to deploy one of the nets, so you have to put on lots of warm, waterproof clothes, a hard hat and a harness and get out on deck. You have to be very careful out there, keeping an eye out for things swinging about. The harness is to stop you falling overboard when putting out the nets. Once we have samples back onboard we sort through these under a microscope. Not easy on a moving ship! We make lots of notes, and then do it all again the next day in a different place, to see how things change from one place to another.

Do you work alone or as part of a team?

A bit of both really. On the ship it is very much a team effort and we all pull together to get things done. Back in Cambridge, we still work as part of a team, but much more time is spent working alone on your own projects.

What would you do if you weren't a marine biologist?

Have a smallholding, growing all my own food. My aim would be to avoid polluting the world as much as possible.