

## Diana E. Varela

Associate Professor, Department of Biology and School of Earth and Ocean Sciences, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada, [dvarela@uvic.ca](mailto:dvarela@uvic.ca)

I have been interested in science for as long as I can remember. Although my first love was astronomy (thanks to Carl Sagan and his TV show, *Cosmos*), leaving home to pursue this passion wasn't an option at the time. Instead, I decided to study oceanography at the Universidad Nacional del Sur in my hometown of Bahía Blanca, Argentina. At that time, the ocean was as unexplored as outer space, which made them both equally fascinating to me. After obtaining my "licenciatura" (equivalent to an Honors BSc) in biological oceanography, I moved further south in Argentina to Puerto Madryn, where I worked on the biogeochemistry of marine sediments at a government institute. For the next four years, fieldwork in Patagonia was an integral part of my life. I worked on small boats and on large research ships, and although I was often the only woman on board, it never bothered me, thanks to the support of my male colleagues.

A summer trip to Woods Hole to take a course at the Marine Biological Laboratory was a turning point in my life, because I was exposed to so much exciting science there. I returned to Woods Hole in 1989 as a master's student in the Boston University Marine Program. The University of British Columbia in Vancouver was my next stop, where I had a fabulous time learning everything I could about phytoplankton eco-physiology, and, as a bonus, earned my doctorate. Postdoctoral positions at universities and government labs took me back to the United States and then to Canada again. In particular, my postdoc at the University of California, Santa Barbara, was a defining point in my scientific career, although it came with some personal challenges. I moved to California on my own with my 10-month-old son because his dad had to stay in Vancouver for work. That experience made me a more compassionate person who has a huge amount of respect for single parents. Despite the change that a child brings to one's life, motherhood has given me a clear realization of what really matters, and what balancing a personal life and a career really means.

As a faculty member at the University of Victoria (Canada) since 2004, I have been involved in projects in warm and cold oceans, many of which took me away from home for



Then and now... (above) Diana participating on a research expedition to the South Atlantic in the late 1980s and (left) during a recent trip to the Antarctic base "Carlini" on King George Island in January 2014. Both photos were taken on the same research ship (formerly the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution first research vessel *Atlantis*, known as *El Austral* after its transfer to Argentina in the 1980s, and recently renamed *Houssay*).



several weeks at a time. I have participated in oceanographic cruises from the Arctic to the equator, conducted research at an Antarctic base, and traveled the world for conferences and workshops to gain and share knowledge about the role of phytoplankton in the world ocean and Earth's climate. All of this would have been impossible without the support of my spouse and my close family, mainly my parents, who helped care for my young child. Now that my son is a wonderful teenager, I have to thank him for putting up with a mom who is not much of a homemaker and who is always marking final exams instead of baking Christmas cookies.

Women have made huge strides in oceanography in the last few decades, often with the guidance and encouragement of wonderful male mentors. The mentorship I received from each of my supervisors and colleagues (male and female) made me a better scientist and increased my commitment to marine sciences, but most importantly, those interactions have enriched my personal life. Now I am trying to give this back to my own graduate students, who I consider "my own kids" and to those enthusiastic undergraduates who, in return, make me feel that I have indeed chosen the right career.