



OCEANOGRAPHY ALUM

LAUREN BRANDKAMP

Snorkeling through pristine coral research sites, starlit kayaking to measure water chemistry... not your typical job. So how did College of the Environment graduate Lauren Brandkamp, who grew up among the wheat fields of eastern Washington, become a scientist-in-residence on a tiny island in the South Pacific?

"I didn't want to grow up, I didn't want to lose my curiosity. And science is a field where you're always asking questions." A graduate of the School of Oceanography, Brandkamp cut her research chops during the senior cruise on the UW-operated Research Vessel Thomas G. Thompson. Upon finishing her degree she was offered a dream job: to live and work on Tetiaroa, a ring of 12 tiny islands in French Polynesia. Purchased by the late actor Marlon Brando in 1967, Tetiaroa is now the site of a research station and eco-resort dedicated to ocean science and sustainability.

Happily accepting, Brandkamp now helps shepherd a project looking at ocean acidification's effect on coral reefs. Led by UW oceanographers Julian Sachs and Alex Gagnon, Brandkamp measures "the heartbeat of the reef": fluctuations of acidity due to daily rhythms of the ecosystem's plants and animals. By understanding the cycles of this thriving coral community, the researchers can establish a baseline upon which changes in health can be detected. "This ecosystem is incredibly complex. Every time we answer one little question, ten more come up. But that's science!"

Brandkamp attributes much of her success to her education. "UW prepared me very well for this position," she says. "I was out on the Thompson the first quarter of my sophomore year. That was crazy! And that's how the next three years went."

Brandkamp's hands-on experience not only prepared her for her current research, it also connected her with her professors' work. For those looking to land a job like hers, Brandkamp emphasizes the importance of getting involved. "Talk to people, and be flexible enough to take on new challenges. Chances are you will wind up in a great place."

The ocean acidification project is funded by the Seeley family, who are long-time supporters of both the University of Washington and Tetiaroa Society—the organization that stewards the science program on the atoll. Their son is an active Tetiaroa Society board member, and many of their family are UW graduates.

"Providing funds for researchers from one of the world's best marine science facilities to work in one of the world's most unique marine environments is something that we as a family are passionate about. Lauren has been a wonderful representative of UW and we are excited about the progress of the ocean acidification research project," Jim Seeley shared.

Brandkamp plans to study marine mammals after her position on Tetiaroa ends. She hopes to add to the knowledge about both Tetiaroa and oceans in general. "As an undergrad you're learning, reading. Now I am at a point where I'm putting a little bit of that back."