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UBC ecologist Maria Lourdes Palomares studied fish from a glass-ceiling boat

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Marine ecologist Maria Lourdes Palomares rose in her profession from a research assistant to a senior scientist and project manager for UBC's Sea Around Us initiative.

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UBC senior scientist Maria Lourdes Palomares has a bit of an unusual reason why she prefers to be called “Deng”, a nickname given her by her grandmother.

She was born with “blue baby syndrome”, which gave her skin a purplish tinge, and her parents—who had already picked out the name Josephine—were frantic with worry.

“They were not stable at the time,” Palomares told the *Straight* in a phone interview. “It was the birth nurse who gave me her name.

“She was very impatient, so she just put her name in the records.”

Palomares went on to make her own name for herself, this one being that of a highly respected marine scientist who manages programs for one of the world’s largest databases of global fisheries information.

As a senior researcher and project manager of UBC's **Sea Around Us** initiative, Palomares oversees a wide range of work, especially research that sheds light on species abundance and distribution going back a century or more.

In recognition of International Women's Day (March 8), Palomares shared some of the experiences that led her to become a high-achieving woman in an area of scientific research that used to be (and still is in some areas) dominated by men.

After deciding against a career in medical research, she gave engineering a try at the University of the Philippines, which was her father's wish.

University department didn't have washrooms for female students

"I did two and a half years of industrial engineering. They were mostly men; there weren't even restrooms for female students," she recalled. "You had to wait until there was no one in them to use the washrooms."

Palomares had always loved the ocean, and when the state university decided to add a department of marine science, she fled engineering. "They were opening up the department and trying to attract new students."

Although a female high-school teacher with a degree in marine biology had helped to inspire her in her academic switch, Palomares also remembered her childhood memories of swimming in ocean water that was "as clear as glass".

"When I was a kid, I used to swim in Manila Bay, but 10 years later, you couldn't swim there, it was so murky. I was so sad to see that. I thought, 'I have to do something.'"

With a marine-ecology master's degree in hand, Palomares went to France to earn a PhD at l'École Nationale Supérieure Agronomique de Toulouse. "I wanted to get my PhD by the time I was 30...I finished it in two years," she said.

Her thesis work, she related with pride, "is used today as a parameter in ecosystem modelling".

Early female naturalists dressed like men

Her research with historical journals from ocean trading and exploration voyages during the 1700s and 1800s led to her discovery of the work of three female naturalists who disguised themselves to be able to work in that men-only preserve. "They dressed like men so they could do their research," she said. "They were, in their own right, scientists. They helped prepare [animal and plant] samples and they wrote up the descriptions....They were not remunerated for their work, but they did most of the work."

"We should not forget history," she added.

She returned to the Philippines to work as a junior scientist at FishBase, an international initiative then focused on researching the world's top commercial fish species.

Her boss there was **Daniel Pauly**, a French-born marine biologist who has since become one of the world's leading researchers on human impacts on global fisheries and who now is project leader for the Sea Around Us. Palomares came to UBC at Pauly's urging in 2001.

She described her work now as “adding artisanal, subsistence, and recreational fisheries data to the global database of fisheries information for all coastal nations”.

Conditions improving for women in science

And she says things are getting better for female scientists, even though when she started as a research assistant in the Philippines, all the scientists were men, with women relegated to administrative or secretarial positions.

“All my bosses were white and male at that point in time. I started really consciously thinking about what was wrong with this system. It made me want to fight it.” She laughed and added, “Now I have teams in the Philippines that are 100-percent female.

“It was a conscious choice for me to hire women. I like female students because they are very dependable.”

Another laugh. “Im sorry if I'm being sexist. I can't do that here.”

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