

MOVERS

Mary Pearl, dean and administrative vice-president, Stony Brook University, Southampton, New York



1993–2009: President, executive director, Wildlife Trust, New York

1994–99: Associate director, Center for Environmental Research and Conservation, New York

1988–93: Assistant director, Wildlife Conservation International, New York

Conservation scientist Mary Pearl had no plans to leave her 15-year post as president and executive director of the Wildlife Trust. But when a headhunter told her about the position of dean and administrative vice-president at Stony Brook University's new Southampton campus, Pearl couldn't decline. The campus features an innovative curriculum centred on sustainability and the environment, and the post was an obvious match given Pearl's long-time devotion to education and environmental stewardship.

"She's driven by the desire to make a change in the world," says Peter Daszak, who succeeds Pearl as Wildlife Trust president. "She has such energy and passion. Every day she asks, 'What have I achieved for conservation today?'"

Initially interested in the evolution of social behaviour, Pearl realized while studying primates that she found sustainability and conservation more compelling. "I was doing my dissertation research in Pakistan at a time when dams were silting up because trees were being cut down for firewood," Pearl says. "I thought, 'I can study these monkeys, but the larger issue is, will they have a forest?'"

With a PhD in physical anthropology, Pearl began working at the World Wildlife Fund. "I had to talk my way into a job there, and the only job available was in corporate fundraising," Pearl remembers. "But it became a great lesson in bringing in different people to solve problems."

In her next position, at the Wildlife Conservation Society, Pearl developed an Asia-Pacific programme. Later, she became associate director of the Center for Environmental Research and Conservation, a consortium based at Columbia University, New York, that includes the Wildlife Trust. Pearl also co-founded the Consortium for Conservation Medicine, a collaboration of Wildlife Trust with other organizations and universities. Conservation medicine examines the links between wildlife, ecosystems and human health.

At Southampton, Pearl will bring her zeal to a new audience. She looks forward to overseeing a new curriculum centered around not departments but rather issues related to sustainability, public policy and natural resource management. "This is tremendously exciting, to create a new model of undergraduate education based on issues of sustainability," she says. "We will engage the bright and driven student who is interested in how our natural systems on this planet need to be managed. This is a serious enterprise, not some kooky experiment." ■

Karen Kaplan

BRICKS & MORTAR

Precourt takes up energy challenge

Stanford University's \$100-million new Precourt Institute for Energy, announced in January, has a bold mission: to tackle the spectrum of science and policy challenges needed to meet future energy demands.

It faces a complex mix of political, environmental and national security concerns. While developing renewable sources, the institute also plans long-term interdisciplinary research programmes aimed at making a new system sustainable. These will include social issues such as economics and behavioural aspects of energy use.

"By forging programmes across disciplinary boundaries, our efforts can become more than the sum of their parts," says director Lynn Orr.

The institute will start recruiting faculty soon, while using Stanford's existing talent: 137 specialists in sustainable energy, climate, energy efficiency and materials.

Materials science will be a key component. "You can argue that more than half the potential solutions to energy problems — particularly those involving energy harvesting, storage and transport — are related to materials," says Zhi-Xun Shen, director of Stanford's Geballe Laboratory for Advanced Materials. Shen says Precourt will allow the university to work on both immediate

improvements — such as developing nanostructured materials to improve solar conversion and manipulating electrochemistry to improve battery performance — and longer-term policy and infrastructure solutions.

With so many diverse researchers focused on the issue, Orr says, there will be training opportunities in almost every area. The first of 20 new graduate fellowships and five postdocs will be available through an internal competition among energy-related departments later this year.

Shen says it's becoming clear that energy decisions affect the economy as well as climate change and national security. The funders are a group of Stanford alumni (including Jay Precourt, who has given the new institute its name) with ties to the energy, oil and investment industries.

John Doerr, a partner at investment firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield and Byers, says that providing renewable-energy resources while protecting the planet presents an opportunity to remake the global economy. Orr says that the institute plans to attract those interested in both scientific innovation and economic feasibility. "We need to change an entire set of energy systems," he says. "To do that, we need as many players as we can get on the field." ■

Virginia Gewin

POSTDOC JOURNAL

Cyclical science

"I am sorry son, but I have just been laid off." Those were my father's words to me 16 years ago amid the recession of the early 1990s. It was a brutally hot summer's day in my hometown of Plano, Texas, when I received that worrisome news. I was 15 years old and he was a manager at Texas Instruments. Uncertainty about the future consumed my thoughts. Will we have to move? How will we be able to buy things such as food and clothes? Fortunately, my dad got a job a few months later.

Fast-forward 16 years. Another economic recession is leaving thousands of people jobless every week. As a postdoc, I am looking to establish a career soon. But I don't relish the possibility that one day I may have to tell my kids that their dad doesn't have a job. After all, I know how it feels.

With the current recession, questions race through my mind. How long will it last? Should I delay entering the job market and wait for the economy to get better? If I take a position too soon, will I be laid off shortly thereafter?

Nevertheless, at the end of the day I am an optimist. The US economy is usually cyclical, and so I am convinced that it will rebound. I don't know how bad the recession will become, but I know this too shall pass. ■

Bryan Venters is a postdoctoral fellow with the Center for Gene Regulation at the Pennsylvania State University.