

Marine Ecologist & Artist

Dr Sue Pillans

What does a Marine Ecologist/Artist do?

As a Marine Ecologist I study marine life and how it interacts with its surroundings, including natural and human environments. I incorporate my love of art into my devotion for the ocean through the creation of marine artworks and visual stories. I am a graphic recorder and use my science, strategy and artistic skills to visually communicate people's stories. I also have an alter ego, Dr Suzie Starfish, who uses art and science storytelling to share the wonders of our underwater world using inspiration, imagination, illustration and information.



What do you work in and what is your speciality?

I currently run my own creative communications business, "Picture your ideas" with Dr Sue Pillans, where I offer a range of services including graphic recording, creative communications, art into science into schools, marine artworks and kids picture books. Prior to commencing my own business, I worked in the Queensland Government leading and developing public policy initiatives across different portfolios including natural resource management, marine conservation planning and strategic regional planning.

My speciality in the underwater world is in the planning and management of marine coastal resources. Our inshore environments such as mangroves, sea-grasses and mud flats are often overlooked for their sexier cousins the coral reefs, but these inshore coastal systems are the engine rooms and lungs of our oceans, so we need to know how they work and what animals and organisms depend upon them to survive. From this information we can then work with coastal communities to help them to use and conserve these precious coastal environments for the future.

I believe that science communicated appropriately (ie. through storytelling) can not only inform decision-making at the highest of levels, but help to improve people's lives and livelihoods.

How did you become interested in this area and when did you first start?

I grew up at the beach and have always had a fascination for the natural environment, particularly the sea and all the wonders that lie beneath it. Art has always been a part of my life as well so I'm now in a wonderful position to be able to combine my love of art and science to communicate stories about the wonders of our oceans.

What study path have you taken to get here?

I started by undertaking a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Studies and went straight into doing my Honours degree. From there I did my PhD at the University of Queensland (UQ) focusing on the effectiveness of marine protected areas in subtropical Australia. Following the completion of my PhD I was awarded an adjunct Research Fellow position at UQ which I still hold today and use to help students, postgraduates and university staff communicate their science to help inform public policy and Government decision-making.

What do you like most about your job?

I have the best job in the world as I am living the life of a marine ecologist, artist and creative communicator so each day brings new experiences and amazing opportunities. I am certainly living my life in colour these days!

As Dr Suzie Starfish one of the highlights, and absolute joys of my job, is visiting schools and using art and science to share the wonders of our underwater world with the younger generation – who are our future ocean stewards. The reactions from students of all ages to the art of ocean science is just an amazing experience.

Do you have any particular career highlights?

Getting my PhD was a big day for me as I was told in High School that I probably wouldn't get into University! Swimming with whale sharks has to be right up there as one of the most amazing natural underwater experiences you could ever have too!

With my science, strategy and artistic background I am so fortunate to be able to work with a diverse range of people on many local, regional and global issues to help "picture their ideas".

What advice would you give to someone interested in working in this area?

Firstly, follow your passions as that is where your strengths lie. But also don't be afraid to try new things as all of life's experiences (the good and the bad) will help you to get where you want to be, even trying those things considered "outside the box"! I believe if you follow your passions you can turn something you love into something you live.

Also, find yourself a mentor or start following and engaging with people who interest you and you will start to 'sea' the endless possibilities out there!

And finally, just dive in!