

'Get a good skillset and follow your heart': How I switched my career in finance for ocean conservation

By: Michael Holder, Business Green

Workforce 2030: Blue Marine Foundation CEO Clare Brook discusses her career path from impact investing to leading Europe's largest marine conservation NGO.

Clare Brook is CEO at the Blue Marine Foundation, Europe's largest marine conservation NGO. Prior to that, she spent almost 25 years working in sustainable finance and investment at Janus Henderson Investors, the UK Sustainable Investment and Finance Association (UKSIF), Aviva, and WHEB Asset Management.

BusinessGreen: What was your previous job and how did you get into it?

Clare Brook: My previous career from 1990 to 2014 was in sustainable finance, working on pioneering environmental and impact investment funds at Jupiter, Henderson, Aviva and WHEB Asset Management.

Why did you decide to change job?

By 2014, I felt that I'd achieved as much as I could by 'moving the dial' in sustainable investing. It was time to do something more impactful, and so when I heard about the Blue Marine Foundation and the significant impact that was possible through ocean conservation, I was hooked.

What attracted you to your current career path?

The climate and biodiversity crises are the most existential that humans have ever faced. Knowing that, I couldn't devote my working life to anything other than playing my own small part in trying to stave these off and to create a more liveable planet for as many people as possible. I've never been able to separate my ideals from my work, so I've been very lucky to have always had roles that combine the two.

What was the first step you took towards changing your career?

When I left the world of impact investing and joined the Blue Marine, Foundation, it was down to my dear friend Cindy Forde who invited me to help with Blue Marine Foundation's finances. I did a SWOT analysis and presented it to the board and then they invited me to join as chief finance officer. I became CEO a few months later.

What does a typical working day look like for you?

There is no typical day at the Blue Marine Foundation - that's one of the brilliant things about working here. I'll be meeting with government ministers in the Caribbean one day, helping them devise strategies to protect 30 per cent of their waters, then working with our blue economics team another. Or I'll be meeting with the UK Prime Minister's

environmental advisers on another day, and then washing mugs in our Somerset House office the next.

What do you enjoy most about your current job?

Working with a fantastic team of like-minded people who all care to the point of obsession about trying to protect life in the ocean. Seeing the team grow over the years - there were six of us when I joined and now there are 80 - and seeing my colleagues thriving in their roles.

Are there any skills or experience gained in your previous career that support your current role?

Yes, there are lots of overlaps between building up funds under management in sustainable investment to building an NGO. To build funds under management, you need the best people delivering great performance with high integrity and then people want to invest in your funds. With the Blue Marine Foundation, it's a question of the best people delivering the most impact and that attracts donors. That's why we've gone from £1m in turnover to £17m in the last decade.

What are the biggest misconceptions about your job or working in a 'green' industry?

That the ocean isn't the most important ecosystem on Earth, that the biggest threat to the ocean is actually overfishing – the mass-scale removal of life. That protection of the ocean is a luxury rather than one of the most important things we can do to stave off climate and biodiversity catastrophe.

What were the biggest challenges you faced in changing careers?

I had to take a pretty big salary hit! But it's been worth it. When I joined Blue Marine my children were aged 10 and seven and they had to put up with me often being away or working instead of giving them my full attention. I feel sad about that, but they are now 22 and 19 and they're great, so maybe it was good for them not having me breathing down their necks.

Did you need to gain additional skills, training or qualifications for your current role?

Well, I'm constantly learning, every single day. Luckily, I work with a lot of marine biologists because I studied history so barely knew one end of a fish from another when I joined the Blue Marine Foundation. I'm getting a bit better, but I'm still hopeless compared with my colleagues.

How do you hope to see your career progressing in future?

I wouldn't be able to work anywhere other than the Blue Marine Foundation – I've reached career Nirvana! I just want to see it go from strength to strength – there's still so much more we need to do.

Has moving into a 'greener' career changed your outlook on life?

I've only ever had a 'green' career, but moving into a 'blue' career has opened my eyes to the fact that the ocean is the most important ecosystem on Earth and that protecting it is one of the easiest and best-value interventions we can make - if only politicians would wake up to that.

Is there anything you know now that you wish you'd known when you started out?

In the early days of sustainable investing, in the 1990s and 2000s, we got a lot of grief from companies and colleagues who thought we were mad. They called us tree huggers. But now most companies realise that environmental issues cannot be ignored. So I suppose I wish we'd been even bolder and more strident because history has proved us right. I would say to anyone starting out in an environmental career: don't let the nay-sayers get you down – and that includes warmongering septuagenarians in charge of global politics.

What advice would you give to someone looking to change career paths into a 'green' job or industry?

Don't necessarily think that you have to study environmental sciences. NGOs are crying out for accountants, lawyers, filmmakers, investigative journalists, strategists, entrepreneurs and political analysts, to name but a few. So, I'd say get a good skillset which suits your head and then follow your heart.

Did you find the process of changing career paths challenging or straightforward?

It required a bit of persistence because the Blue Marine Foundation wasn't sure if it could afford a CFO. At one point I remember breaking down in front of my partner, saying: 'I want this so much – everything I've worked for thus far has been leading to this role.' But luckily, I got the job and I've never looked back.

What could companies and the government do to make it easier for people to upskill or switch to greener careers?

That is a very big question. Essentially, governments need to realise that economic growth and environmental protection aren't at odds with each other – they go hand in hand. And that the majority of young graduates would rather work in support of the sustainable economy, so these areas need to be invested in so that jobs are created. In places like the Caribbean where we work in partnership with local NGOs and governments, I'm interested in fostering what I call 'the regeneration generation' where a

whole range of jobs are created in marine science, data collection, diving, drone operation, satellite monitoring, restoration and protection.