

## The Sri Lankan Lass

# Who Won the World With Marine Biology



Asha De Vos  
Marine Biologist

Having your work revolve around a great ocean giant such as the blue whale and other ocean creatures would seem quite surreal for most of us; Asha de Vos with whom we were able to have a brief conversation, does in fact live that dream.

When we spoke to Asha, who is a marine biologist by profession, the first question we asked her was, 'How did the passion for marine biology and especially the blue whale come about?' She says that she always fancied being an adventure scientist, and combining her love for wair and animals paved the path to becoming who she is today.

From the age of six Asha has been fascinated with the ocean and the creatures within. For her, seeing the blue whales feeding in our Ocean was mind-blowing given that she was not expecting to see that in tropical Seas.

In fact no one was. So after one set of questions led to another, we found out that the blue whale is definitely the main species she works with as a marine biologist.

Asha presumes that her desire to become a marine biologist from a very young age stemmed from spending hours poring over National Geographic magazines and listening to people like Arthur C. Clarke talk about the great unknown that was the ocean.

It also helped that she grew up in a family that encouraged them to live outside the box, dream, explore and find their own path to happiness.

Her primary education was at Ladies' College where she says that they were always encouraged to study but also to partake in extra-curricular activities. Asha was a

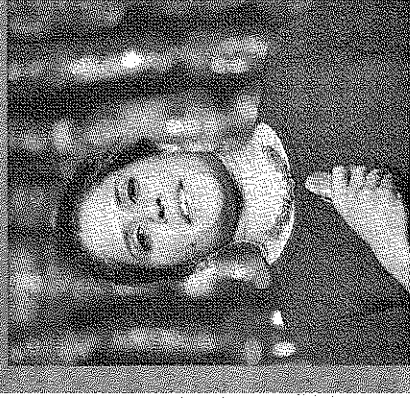
swimmer and a water polo player and her love for water started at a young age. Subsequent to completing her primary education she moved to Scotland for her undergraduate studies at the University of St. Andrews, which is one of the top schools in the world for studying marine mammals. Her desire to continue in the field of marine biology was solidified when she interacted with the passionate scientists at the university marine lab.

There was nothing slowing down Asha with her studies since after completing her undergraduate degree she went on to do her Masters at Oxford, and later obtaining a PhD in Marine Mammal research; she

who are making a positive change in the world.

So we asked Asha her thoughts on being a TED Senior Fellow and she says that it is an incredible honour to have been picked from a pool of absolutely amazing TED Fellows.

Since the TED Fellowship is not subject specific but is open to people from different career paths, Asha says she is exposed to some of the most brilliant minds discussing a wide variety of topics on a daily basis. She further adds that these people who are



adds that none of this would have been possible without the support of her incredible family.

Asha says that her parents always told her to do what she loves and they had no such expectations and never put any pressure for her to become a doctor, lawyer or engineer but they hoped she would choose something worthwhile.

So becoming something as unorthodox as a marine biologist was something they accepted with open arms.

With so many achievements at hand Asha is also a TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Senior Fellow, which is a distinguished achievement since individuals are selected from a group of world's leading thinkers

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TED Fellows are the crème de la crème, who are breaking boundaries and changing the world for the better.

She says that it is a humble feeling to be a part of this family and it has made her look at her work in new and different ways and enabled her to contribute to very different kinds of work.

During Asha's contribution to TED she was gifted with a puppet which resembled her; she says she felt like she had just won an Oscar!

The blue whales found in the Sri Lankan waters have been described by Asha as 'The Unorthodox Whales', since they break the stereotypes we have about blue whales.

The previous research on the blue whale had suggested that all blue whales the world over fed at the poles and then undertook long-range migrations to

higher latitudes to breed and calve. However Asha says that the whales in our waters actually tend to stay around the northern Indian Ocean with some in our waters all year round – so basically they remain in warm waters throughout the year; thereby making us realise that we know so very little about this species, the largest that has ever lived on the planet, and that we have a long way to go in understanding this great ocean giant.

Apart from her research, Asha is also an activist creating awareness about marine life and she says that when her first 'mini feature' by Channel 7 Australia went viral on YouTube, she had emails coming from people around the world, but mostly from Sri Lanka writing to tell her that they did not even know that we had whales in our waters.

She further adds that it is definitely very rewarding to hear how far and wide the word has gone about these whales and most importantly she is excited that the world is starting to realise that us Sri Lankans are completely capable of conducting top quality marine research as well.

Asha was recently awarded with the 2013 President's Award for Scientific Publications; she says that it is always nice to be recognised for the hard work she has done.

She believes that there is no greater honour than being recognised in your own country.

Asha has carried out research focusing on proving how important Sri Lanka is as a feeding area and why it is so productive and attractive to the whales.

From the Internet.

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