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Views

## The Tough Start and Groundbreaking Career of UBC's Dr. Daniel Pauly

In a new biography, the world's most-cited (and most controversial) fisheries scientist tells his story for the first time



Courtesy Paul Joseph / UBC

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Dr. Daniel Pauly is the world's most-cited fisheries scientist, but life for the UBC professor has been far from easy. The biracial son of a French woman and an American GI, he was born in Paris and kidnapped as a child to be a live-in servant for a Swiss family. He escaped to Germany at 17 and put himself through high school by attending evening classes after a full day's work.

Dr. Pauly went on to blow the whistle on the devastation caused to marine ecosystems by the global fishing industry, and to become a marine scientist whose work received worldwide recognition.

Now, readers can learn more in his biography, *The Ocean's Whistleblower* (<https://greystonebooks.com/products/the-oceans-whistleblower>), available this week. Dr. Pauly discusses his extraordinary life and work, including what the future holds for our warming seas.

***The Ocean's Whistleblower delves into intimate details of your life. Why did you decide to share them with the world?***

What's important is that this biography not only talks about my difficult youth as a biracial person in Switzerland and Europe, which is a tear-jerker but it would have been shallow, so it also talks about my research. Given my background, science was a place where I could grow, where I could be. I escaped into science because where I grew up, there were many reasons for me to spiral into a dark place; the family that raised me were petty criminals. What I ended up doing was developing a stiff spine, and since they never made me feel like I was one of them, not doing what they did became a way to build an identity.

Later on, I realized I didn't want to live in Europe, where I was constantly questioned about my origins. I worked in the developing world for 20 years, then found a respite in Canada where I could continue the work that I began in the Philippines and Indonesia in peace.

Collaborating on this book was one way of closing the chapter on what I did while presenting the science and perhaps motivating other people.

***Growing up, you survived by taking odd jobs such as doing quality control at a paint factory or working at a psychiatric hospital. What did you learn in these jobs that you still apply today?***

During those days, I went to high school every weekday from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. after a full day of work. By the end of the 4-year course, of the 115 students that started, only 15 of us remained and we made it not because we were smarter, but because we didn't think about it. The people who asked themselves every evening, 'should I go or not?', didn't make it.

This approach is what enabled me to complete big-data work such as including all known fish species on FishBase, the online, free encyclopedia of all fish or publishing the Global Atlas of Marine Fisheries, which has 400 pages, 273 of which were one-page summaries of the fisheries of all the world's coastal countries and territories. How does one finish such a monstrous work? Well, you start with one and then you do two, three, four until you've done them all.

***You developed the 'shifting baselines syndrome' concept, now widely used including in fields beyond fisheries. What makes it so universal?***

This concept explains how knowledge of environmental disaster fades over time, leading to a misguided understanding of change on our planet. I made a point that observations in the past can be as valid as observations in the present and that if you only look at trends in your lifetime, you will miss the broader picture.

Shifting baselines is the flipside of adaptation. If we humans liked the past too much, we wouldn't be able to move forward. Our ability to forget intergenerationally is an adaptive trait that made us very successful as an invasive species. However, that same ability means that we forget about entities, for example, animal species, that disappear. This can be very negative because when you lose something you don't remember existed, you don't even try to re-establish it. We are seeing this everywhere on our planet.

***What research or work are you are most proud of? What does the future hold for our warming oceans?***

The shifting baselines and the fishing down marine food webs concept, which describes how in certain parts of the ocean, fisheries have depleted large predatory fish and are increasingly catching smaller, and previously spurned, species lower in the food web, are well known, but the most challenging is the Gill Oxygen Limitation Theory (GOLT), which was

termed 'Pauly's folly' when I proposed it as a student in Germany. It posits that the gill area per volume must decline as fish grow and there must be a size at which they don't get enough oxygen.

After creating the Sea Around Us research initiative at UBC's Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries (IOF), my postdoctoral fellow Dr. William Cheung (now director of IOF) built on this work and developed a model to predict the movements of fish in the context of ocean warming. Not only did his model explain why fish move poleward, but he also used my oxygen theory to predict that they will shrink in size by 20 to 30 per cent if ocean temperatures continue to climb.

So, what I realize now is that global warming is offering my story a huge boost. Basically, 'Pauly's folly' is becoming a significant explanation for what fish do in the face of global warming. This is one of those things where it is a sad way to be right.

*This article appears courtesy of UBC and may be found in its original form [here \(https://news.ubc.ca/2021/09/24/dr-daniel-paulys-extraordinary-life-and-work-revealed-in-new-book/\)](https://news.ubc.ca/2021/09/24/dr-daniel-paulys-extraordinary-life-and-work-revealed-in-new-book/).*

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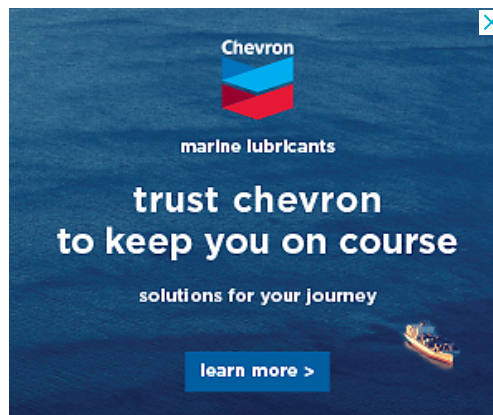
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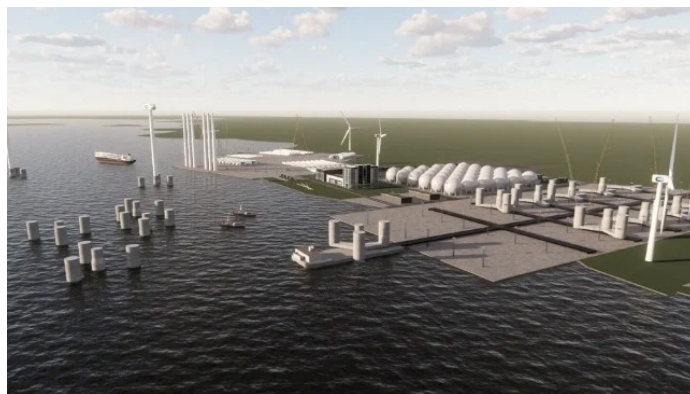
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