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Having discovered a passion for oceanography 'almost by accident', Mike won an IMP that is helping him to balance his research work with the other demands of his career.



Oceanography, for me, happened almost by accident - and I suspect that's true for many people in the field. My first degree was in physics, but I had no idea what I wanted to do career-wise in the long term. When I finished that degree (which was at Southampton) and was pondering what to do next, I became aware of the master's degree in oceanography that was run just along the road from the physics department. The oceanographers seemed a friendly enough bunch, so thought I'd give it a go. Not only did I secure a funded place on the course, but I ended up coming top of the year. The main thing, however, was that I became convinced that I'd found the subject I wanted to devote my research efforts to – the study of the seas.

So gripped, I applied for PhD places, and won one at UEA in Norwich. This was my first foray into Antarctic oceanography, which has been my abiding scientific passion ever since. It was hard work – I think all PhDs are – but ultimately very rewarding. I followed this up with the usual succession of short-term postdoc positions, and then I was fortunate enough to win a NERC Fellowship. This enabled me to pursue my own research ideas and drive my own scientific interests, which was fantastic – the positive feeling of scientific freedom is not to be underestimated! However, I left the Fellowship early, because an even better opportunity presented itself...

In 2000, I joined the British Antarctic Survey as a physical oceanographer on a marine ecosystems programme, which broadened my scientific interest into other disciplines. I then did a two-year stint at the Proudman Oceanographic Laboratory, working with experts in ocean dynamics and sea level, but maintaining the polar aspects of my research. I returned to BAS in 2005 to become a group head, and have since progressed to become a Programme Leader and IMP. Particularly exciting is a new link with the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) in Oban, which will enable me to work with experts in the Arctic, and also diversify my activities to include some more educational and technological aspects.

Being awarded IMP was very gratifying, and has tangible benefits. It has raised my profile and status within BAS, and given me more influence on the science direction of the organisation as a whole. There is also a small extra budget for IMPs to spend on their research, and whilst this is far from copious, it does allow some extra activity. The central principle of IMP is that it should allow the scientific freedom, time and flexibility to progress with personal research, and my hope is that this works for me. The challenge, as ever, will be balancing this with the demands of other activities such as national and international programme coordination and group management duties. Achieving this balance will not be easy, but I remain optimistic!