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MEMORIES

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Sherri Eldridge

1959–2020

Dr. Sherri Eldridge passed away on September 14, 2020, after battling pancreatic cancer. Sherri had a brief, but influential career in marine mammal science. In 2009, at the age of 50 and after numerous careers, she decided to get a PhD and become a whale scientist. By 2017 she had dramatically expanded an emerging field of study—the somatosensory system (tactile sensation) of whales, dolphins, and porpoises. Her friend and colleague Dave Wiley of Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary said, “Whale skin had literally been staring marine biologists in the face forever, but it took Sherri to realize it was much more than just something that covered the animal.” According to Wiley studying whale skin was actually a terrible PhD decision because no other scientists were working on it and there was a scant body of literature to fall back upon. Undeterred, Sherri enrolled in Richard Connor’s PhD program at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and became a recipient of a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Nancy Foster Fellowship, only three of which are awarded nationwide

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each year. Because her topic was outside of the normal marine science curriculum, she augmented her studies with numerous courses at the Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM), where she became a visiting graduate student under the mentorship of neurobiologist Doug Rosene. In 2017 she became the first BUSM student to receive the highly prestigious American Association of University Women's Dissertation Fellowship. When discussing the difficulty of Eldridge's research topic, Darlene Ketten of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) observed, "Sherri had an unflinching optimism and effervescence that was sometimes stunning in light of the challenges she faced in her research, but was always a joy to hear and experience." As a doctoral student, Sherri was not afraid to approach scientists at conferences and convince them that their expertise in a collaboration with her would help unlock the mystery of the somatosensory system. "I remember our first meeting," said Joy Reidenberg of Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai "where Sherri locked up a lunch appointment with me at a conference—even though I didn't have a clue who she was. She was so full of enthusiasm for her project that I just couldn't help but want to get on that train with her and help her investigate the topic further. Thus was born our wonderful scientific collaboration, but even better, was the opportunity to know her as a friend."

Upon receiving her PhD in marine science in 2018, Eldridge became a Guest Investigator at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, working with Michael Moore to expand her investigation into the morphology of sensory innervation in the skin of whales, while relentlessly pursuing support from the National Science Foundation (NSF). In 2019 she organized and cochaired the Sensory Ecology Workshop at the World Marine Mammal Conference in Barcelona, Spain, and in 2020 she received an NSF Postdoctoral Research Fellowship for "Investigating the Rules of Life Governing Interactions Between Genomes, Environment and Phenotypes." Working again with Moore's lab, her project, "Mechanisms of sensory reception in the hydrodynamically-adapted skin of cetaceans" was set to break new ground in the field of marine mammalogy. According to Moore, "Sherri was a unique force. Her understanding of the nerves of whale skin was groundbreaking and extraordinary." Although her untimely death predated publication of her pioneering research, many of Sherri's colleagues plan to assist with completing her manuscripts to assure that her achievements and valuable knowledge will be available to future scientists. While colleagues will continue her inspired work, her wisdom, guidance, energy, and vision will be missed. Donations in her honor can be made through GoFundMe to benefit the Woods Hole

Oceanographic Institution she cared so much about at:

https://www.gofundme.com/f/in-memory-of-sherri-eldridge?utm_source=customer&utm_campaign=p_cp+share-sheet&utm_medium=copy_link_all

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