

The Spirit of Being Bold

Interview with Tobias Aguirre ('94) by Haley Campbell ('02)

“If you take care of the present, the future will take care of itself.” This is one of the many positive beliefs that guides Tobias Aguirre’s life. Tobias is the Chief Executive Officer of FishWise, a nonprofit sustainable seafood consultancy dedicated to improving the health of ocean ecosystems. Tobias is helping individual companies integrate sustainable practices, but more importantly, he is working to influence the global industry by building impactful collaborations and resources that empower the industry to take responsibility for itself, thus benefiting the environment and human welfare.

Tobias’s journey has been fueled by a strong work ethic, deep passion, and inherent trust in himself and in life. He began his education at a Waldorf school in Sacramento, and in 1987, when Tobias was 11, he moved with his father and two of his four

brothers to Mount Madonna Center (MMC). They lived briefly in a tiny room below the farmhouse and then moved into an old goat shed across from the lake where the Conference Center now stands. This was a fun time to be a kid at MMC – there were many resident children and the Mount Madonna School (MMS) boarding school was a lively place. Then, as now, theater was central to school life. Tobias played Ravana in the *Ramayana!* all four years in high school. His senior year director Sampad Kachuck asked if he would like to be Hanuman instead, but Tobias was too attached to his role as Ravana. His powerful performance remains a highlight for long-time community members (including this author). Like today, many high school students played volleyball back then. In 1992, the very first year that MMS joined the league, it was the league champion, a streak Tobias and his team held onto throughout high school. Tobias and several of his teammates went on to play in the Junior Olympics where he, PK Diffenbaugh ('95), and Jagadish Cheney ('92) were named All-Americans.

After graduating in 1994, Tobias attended Stanford and studied 20th century protest movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement and anti-colonialism in Africa. He was fascinated by the ways that generations can clash as young people seek to throw off the old order and determine their own destinies through the pursuit

of greater equality and new societal design. To complete his senior thesis, Tobias attended the Plum Village Summer Opening in southwest France where he studied under the Zen Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh, who was nominated by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963 for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in the Vietnamese Peace Movement. Tobias spent five weeks at Plum Village, gaining a deeper

understanding of the history and circumstances of the Vietnam War, which inspired Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings of Engaged Buddhism, a practice that moves meditation to action. Tobias was very moved by the experience and teachings, which built upon an aphorism he had learned from Baba Hari Dass (Babaji) at MMC: “Motivation to bring peace to others is the cause of peace within.” This has remained a central theme in Tobias’s life and work.

After graduation, Tobias returned to Santa Cruz and worked at Wildwood Natural Foods. “I was the only Stanford-educated tofu delivery guy



possibly in the world at that time.” He remained at Wildwood for three years, which afforded him the freedom to explore his next steps.

Tobias attended graduate school at the University of California San Diego’s (UCSD) School of International Relations and Pacific Studies. During the summer between his first and second year, he interned at FishWise. The organization was brand new and had just received its first grant of \$75,000 from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, which was funding organizations to help develop sustainable seafood strategies as a means to improve the overall health of the oceans. Tobias participated in a pilot program with New Leaf Community Markets wherein FishWise applied the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch science and sustainability recommendations to the point of sale, so that customers could be more informed about their seafood choices and help the ocean environment. New Leaf made more money overall when offering sustainable choices. This success motivated Tobias to focus his second year of graduate school on building towards a career in this field, and upon graduation, he convinced FishWise to hire him as a project manager. He was their fourth employee. A few years later he was promoted to his current role.

“Dreams come true,” is a platitude that Tobias and his wife Jessica, a yoga teacher and counselor at Salud Para La Gente, often say to each other. Tobias first met Jessica at a youth retreat at MMC when he was sixteen. Fifteen years later in 2007 they met again at Carby’s Zimmerman’s ('92) wedding in Corralitos. “It was love at second sight,” Tobias said of Jessica. By living with gratitude, positive intentions, and a strong work ethic, they have created their dream life. They married in 2011 and have two sons, Arias Moon (four and a half



Tobias evaluating the sustainability of a salmon farm in British Columbia

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and Finnegan Star (two and a half). They recently bought a beautiful home in the Aptos hills. “I’ve never had a grand plan for myself, but if I live life well day to day, life seems to be taking care of itself and taking care of me. You can turn your passions and dreams into a vocation.”

More than a billion people rely on seafood as their primary source of protein. With such power, the industry can be a force for good or bad. By engaging in conversations and collaborations around the world, FishWise helps to create systems and resources for an incredibly complex industry. “If your seafood is environmentally sustainable, but is connected with modern day slavery, you’ve only solved part of the problem,” Tobias said. Recent investigative journalism uncovered labor abuses and human trafficking in Thailand. Vulnerable populations of migrants were promised jobs at resorts, but were then shipped out to sea for three years where they were forced to work around the clock and were threatened with violence or death. FishWise does outreach to labor and environmental groups to integrate the conversation and act as a liaison to address the human rights and labor issues. Through collaboration they create resources to understand the complexities of the problems and its potential solutions.

FishWise is working with the World Wildlife Fund, Future of Fish, and the Global Food Traceability Center to change traceability practices. President Obama initiated a Presidential Task Force that resulted in a seafood import-monitoring program wherein suppliers are required to provide traceability information in order to export products into the U.S. market. Starting in October 2017, Tobias will be working more directly with the U.S. government through a collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Admini-

stration (NOAA), the State Department and leading foundations to increase the adoption of electronic traceability.

With every project and collaboration, Tobias sets out to help people become leaders in the industry. His core organizational philosophy is that, “We’re all leaders and we’re all more ready than we think. I want to empower people to live and embody that.” His work revolves around building a community of practice, which he carries from his Mount Madonna days. “There is no better description for MMC than a community of practice.” Drawing from those early experiences has allowed him to live a life where he can create environments where everyone’s voice is heard and respected and everyone contributes in their own way. “This has become my way of life professionally.”

He credits Mount Madonna for launching him into a successful life. “Going to MMS makes you realize that people are trying to live with meaning, not materialistic pursuits.” He kept that mindset as he transitioned to Stanford, UCSD, and FishWise. Every time he is on a panel or speaking at a conference, he thinks about being onstage and remembers that he’s been doing this since he was in seventh grade, in performing arts classes. “In that sense, Sampad is always with me.” He often reflects on former teacher Sadanand Mailliard’s consistent inquiry of what it means to live a meaningful life. Teacher Premdas Rohan taught him that having fun and playing is just as important as learning and studying.

Mount Madonna remains a community touchstone and foundation in Tobias’s life. “All of the family and friends that I have there... that will always be a grounding force. It will always be a home to go back to.” Someday he hopes his two boys will help put more champion volleyball banners on the gym walls.

Tobias is excited to see where his work will go and what his talented staff at FishWise can achieve. He hopes that we will soon see a seafood industry that respects and values the people who are responsible for bringing our food to us, and he works for a demonstrable change in the health of fisheries and oceans. “That spirit of being bold and trying to improve society has never been more important. So my advice to fellow alumni and current students of Mount Madonna is to aspire to make a difference in the world; there’s no greater journey. As Paul Hawken said, ‘you are brilliant and the Earth is hiring.’”

What can consumers do to support the health of the ocean and the seafood industry?

- Find a grocery store that has a publicly available sustainable seafood policy (usually on their website) that explains what they’re doing and what credible programs guide their choices
- Buy local seafood. California and the U.S. in general have some of the best fishery management, so farmers markets are good places to shop
- Download the Seafood Watch app for decision-making at your fingertips
- The lower on the food chain the sea creature is, the more sustainable they tend to be because they reproduce quicker to be more abundant. For example, farmed shellfish is generally very sustainable
- Throw out the myth of only buying “wild-caught.” Done responsibly, aquaculture fills the gap for production that wild fisheries cannot keep up with, and it often offers more sustainable options. Catfish, trout, and shellfish are often good farmed options

Tobias at Mount Madonna in 1992

Tobias with his family in Fiji in 2016

