Recently, it feels like I’m making my own giant leap. I’ve spent the past decade building up academic credentials, doing all the things a scientist needs to do to land a faculty appointment. I’ve published frequently in good journals, more each year. I’ve landed competitive funding from respected sources and built a research program that involves postgraduates. I’ve taught several classes and mentored graduate students. Most of this has been rewarding. But in the overly busy mode that most researchers operate in, I found I was feeling less bullish about academia as I knew it and increasingly uncertain it was the right fit.

I had the benefit of several mentors who encouraged me to explore other career options, and in 2013, I took a half-time appointment with a conservation-focused nonprofit as a scientist with an applied focus. I was tasked with supporting their conservation programs with the best available science, working across fields to bring together insights that could inform conservation practice.

I was surprised to find I enjoyed this work much more than basic research. I could see findings being put to work, and the healthy debate about how to adapt research into practice was invigorating and challenging. I gained a new appreciation for the importance of moving research out of the ivory tower, and for the skills needed to engage in that translational role.

Ironically, at about that time, my academic job searches finally started to yield fruit. I was invited for two faculty interviews, both at top-tier research universities. During one, I entered a pressure-cooker group interview, where faculty members lob hard questions at you while you try not to squirm. One of them asked me, “Jack, fast-forward 35 years. We are celebrating your career and accomplishments at your retirement party. What are we celebrating?” I gave a safe answer: “I made an impact on my field of scholarship. I trained some graduate students who have gone on to successful careers” and so on. First she nodded—but then she banged the table emphatically. “That’s not good enough,” she said.

She was right. In that split second of terror, I realized what my real bar for accomplishment was. It wasn’t developing new theory, pioneering new methods, or getting research published in the best journals. I answered again: “You’re right. The bar for me is that when my career is winding down, because of my work, something is different in the water.” What I meant was, when I’m done I want to be able to say that I’ve had a measurable, significant impact on the environment I work to improve. “That’s more like it,” the professor responded.

This interaction haunted me for weeks because it compelled a follow-up question: “If this is my measure for success, what work must I do to achieve it?” I did some deep thinking and realized that my conservation work—not my academic research—was the work that would help me achieve those lofty goals.

I recalled seeing a presentation months before, in which the presenter asked his audience, “What got you into this field in the first place?” My answer: “I got in because I wanted to make things better.” But since then, my goals had shifted insidiously; my academic mentors were training new versions of themselves, and I had gone along. I had strayed from my original intention to use new knowledge to effect real-world change. And although I believe ardently that people can create change in a variety of work environments, I knew I needed to pursue a career that would ultimately be more rewarding. That’s why I decided to make the leap.

In April, Jack Kittinger became the director of Conservation International’s Hawai’i Fish Trust program. For more on life and career issues, visit http://www.sciencecareers.org.
A giant leap
John N. (Jack) Kittinger

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