

By Sidney F. Gouveia

The detour that became a shortcut

Like many science students, I had always envisioned a pretty straightforward career path: a graduate degree, postdoctoral research, and—if all went well—a faculty position. But I was thrown off this track before I even completed my bachelor's degree in biology. A university strike delayed my graduation, and as a result I missed the graduate school application deadline. Suddenly I had no idea what my future might hold, and I needed to make a living. I was relieved to be offered a job managing a newly established conservation area in my home state of Sergipe in Brazil, and I was excited about working to support biodiversity. But in the back of my mind, I worried that the job would take me in the wrong direction, away from the academic career I still desired.

The idea of managing a protected area was appealing, but my everyday workload was far from inspiring. I handled some interesting challenges, such as reaching a compromise with the ranchers whose cattle needed to cross the reserve for water. But I spent more time on paperwork and meetings than on ecosystems and biodiversity. And the only opportunities for career advancement were administrative positions, one step away from becoming a career bureaucrat. That was not how I wanted to spend my life.

So, 3 years in, I decided that I needed to make a change. I had managed to complete a master's degree in ecology and conservation on the side while working at my day job, and in my spare time, I studied the reserve's frogs. But it was time to get back on the academic ladder full time. Applying to Ph.D. programs was the obvious next step.

When I was accepted into a program in ecology and evolution, I couldn't wait to trade government paperwork for the intellectual stimulation of being fully immersed in research. Yet I was a bit unsure how well my transition back to academia would go. Would the skills I developed during my years at the reserve be of any use in my new endeavor, or would I be hopelessly rusty and lost?

At first, as I had feared, I felt a little behind my fellow students. Despite the supportive environment, I couldn't escape the fact that I lacked skills vital to my new research field, such as programming and advanced statistics. I doubted that I would ever make any progress in my research or produce a decent thesis.

But I soon realized that, during my time at the reserve, I had developed my own valuable skills. Managing the



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conservation area, which relied on community participation and compromise, had taught me to work collaboratively. Through juggling reserve management, community meetings, and endless paperwork, I had learned to work creatively and, above all, to get things done. I soon realized that doing multivariate analyses was no harder than dealing with the multidimensional problems of reserve management, and that writing scientific papers was no more demanding than compiling environmental policy reports. And my collaborative approach served me well as I worked closely with my new peers. In time, I gained the confidence I needed to succeed.

Three years after starting my Ph.D., I found what I hoped would be my next career step: a permanent faculty position at my alma mater. As I went into overdrive to finish my thesis and put together a compelling application, I drew on abilities honed during my time managing the conservation area—including meeting deadlines and multitasking effectively—to wrap up my degree and land the job.

Looking back, I appreciate how my precocious experience as a reserve administrator has contributed to my progress in academia. I had been thrown into the deep end, alone at a completely new reserve, where I was expected to mediate conflicts and solve problems with next to no resources. In turn, I developed creativity, persuasiveness, and patience. My initial detour from my academic goals ended up being a shortcut to the career I have always wanted. ■

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