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Scientist Profile: Darren Fong, Aquatic Ecologist

Golden Gate National Recreation Area (<https://www.nps.gov/goga/>), Point Reyes National Seashore (<https://www.nps.gov/pore/>)



Darren wears many hats with the Bay Area parks, including supporting the intertidal long-term monitoring program. Darren is pictured here out in the field at a rocky intertidal monitoring site in Marin County.

NPS / Maritte O'Gallagher

Darren's childhood fascination: cold-blooded pets

"Like a lot of people, I started young. I had very permissive parents in terms of them allowing me to have a variety of different animals as pets, and not your typical dog and cat. I had more cold-blooded animals than warm-blooded animals growing up: fish, red-eared slider turtles, alligator lizards...I think my longest-lived pet was a toad that we called Froggy that I had for probably eight years.

"We would go to parks, and I'd play in the creek and bring back tadpoles. We had some tiny, postage stamp-sized ornamental ponds in the backyard of our San Francisco house. We'd put tadpoles in, like chorus frog and western toad tadpoles, and the tadpoles would metamorphos and grow up into adult frogs and toads.

"Chorus frogs are only about the size of the quarter, but when they chorus they are really loud. I remember my dad being a bit irritated that these frogs were right beneath his bedroom window, and they'd be going off at night. He was always a light sleeper. So that was the one thing that he wasn't too thrilled about that I brought home."

Keep Wildlife Wild

Today, Darren would not have let his younger self collect tadpoles from the wild. Many amphibians and other wild animal populations are struggling. The best way to help is to watch animals in their natural habitat from a safe distance. For example, check out this [StoryMap on how to help foothill yellow-legged frogs](https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fstorymaps.arcgis.com%2Fstories%2Fd12939a62870403391dc3f4689682574&data=04%7C01%7Cmaritte_ogallagher%40partner.nps.gov%7Ca9575115813b437057ed08d9260eba00%7C0693b5ba4b184d7b9341f32f400a5494%7C0%7C0%7C637582666950005974%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWljojMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzliLCJBTiI6IklhaWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&data=5Z3PcH5GgnE%2BV7z5gpSNF3m%2BcnAVn3ggF%2B0E2vVTyfw%3D&reserved=0) (https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fstorymaps.arcgis.com%2Fstories%2Fd12939a62870403391dc3f4689682574&data=04%7C01%7Cmaritte_ogallagher%40partner.nps.gov%7Ca9575115813b437057ed08d9260eba00%7C0693b5ba4b184d7b9341f32f400a5494%7C0%7C0%7C637582666950005974%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWljojMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzliLCJBTiI6IklhaWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&data=5Z3PcH5GgnE%2BV7z5gpSNF3m%2BcnAVn3ggF%2B0E2vVTyfw%3D&reserved=0) in California. Interacting with wildlife can also cause other kinds of harm to both [people](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/watchingwildlife/people.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/watchingwildlife/people.htm>) and [wildlife](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/watchingwildlife/animals.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/watchingwildlife/animals.htm>), including injury and disease. Plus, it is illegal to feed, touch, tease, frighten, or intentionally disturb wildlife in national parks. Learn more from the National Park Service's [Watching Wildlife website](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/watchingwildlife/index.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/watchingwildlife/index.htm>).

Discovering a love for the outdoors and freshwater ecology

"As I got older, I was fortunate to have friends that were interested in outdoor activities and convinced me to join Scouts. With Scouts, I had the opportunity to do backpacking, camping, and hiking. My parents were never remotely interested in those things, so I was fortunate that people around me were able to nurture and foster an appreciation of the outdoors.

"A lot of people have that one keystone professor or course in school that shapes your interests. I had a professor like that in freshwater ecology as an undergrad studying Environmental Science at UC Berkeley. I did some thesis work looking at the effects of logging on streams, and went on to get my masters in Wildland Resource Science working with the same professor.

"There's all these different interconnections [in freshwater ecology]. The animals that live in freshwater environments depend not just on the conditions in the water, but also the terrestrial habitats surrounding them. The dynamism between all these different things is pretty fascinating.

"On top of that, I developed a personal interest in freshwater environments and ended up getting into kayaking. Now when we go out as a family, we're usually trying to find a stream that my son can play in, or where I can bring out my mask and snorkel and snorkel around or go down in my kayak. I take my kayaks everywhere. They take up a lot of space, even though they're supposed to be compact. It gets to a point where it's a little bit cumbersome to have all this gear, but it's always really fun."

Joining the parks

"Of my first few jobs, the best experience I had was an internship with [Sequoia National Park](https://www.nps.gov/seki/index.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/seki/index.htm>) during my senior year of college. I was an intern for the wildlife ecologist, and was able to help him with a wide range of activities, from sampling stream water quality next to some of their campgrounds (because they wanted to make sure their campgrounds were not polluting the streams) to a home-range study for the yellow-bellied Marmot. It was cool to go out hiking into these beautiful alpine areas of Sequoia.



Darren checks a net for Western pond-turtles as part of the headstart project.

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"I think those experiences as an intern put a bug in my ear for the different cool things that biologists do with the National Park Service, and any type of job that would have wildlife field work and work in streams. I worked with the Forest Service right after grad school, and then ended up working with US Fish and Wildlife Service for a couple years, which was a total desk job. I learned that I didn't like spending time at meetings and behind a desk, even for important things. That led me to apply for the aquatic ecologist job here at [\[Golden Gate \(https://www.nps.gov/goga/index.htm\)\]](https://www.nps.gov/goga/index.htm) with the National Park Service. I knew some people working at Golden Gate from my grad program, so I had some familiar faces here."

Darren's role as an aquatic ecologist

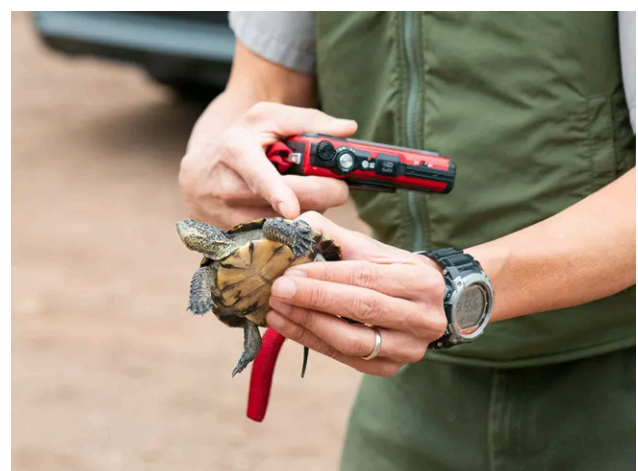
"I'm grateful for the job I have. When I started at Golden Gate in 1994, I had this idealized view that I'd be spending most of my time out in the field monitoring our aquatic resources, but it hasn't really turned out like that. I spend one to two days a week in the field. I spend a lot of time reviewing other projects that have the potential to affect aquatic resources, and there's always a lot of coordination involved."

"I feel like my roots are in doing field work and actually touching the ground; that's where my strengths are. Less so for managing people and projects. I almost think if we had all the money in the world, and all the people in the world, it would be overwhelming for me. I'd be more of a manager rather than a field person. It would change the way I work."

"Right now I'm at the tail end of a [headstart project that we've been working on with the SF Zoo and with Sonoma State to bring Western pond turtles back to our park \(https://www.parksconservancy.org/article/california-native-freshwater-turtle-returns-rodeo-valley-watershed\)](https://www.parksconservancy.org/article/california-native-freshwater-turtle-returns-rodeo-valley-watershed). It's been doing really well: we are hopeful that we will have a self-sustaining population of western pond turtles at two sites within the park, Muir Beach and Rodeo lake. It's been cool to start at the beginning of a project and watch it come full circle, and I'm really excited about how it's progressing."

Staying optimistic in a changing world

"There's a lot of factors that we don't have control over that have a large influence on our local populations. We spent so much time and effort on a [coho jumpstart project \(https://wildlife.ca.gov/Drought/Projects/Redwood-Creek-Coho\)](https://wildlife.ca.gov/Drought/Projects/Redwood-Creek-Coho) to prevent the population in Redwood Creek from going extinct. The amount of returns we are getting is tiny compared to the amount of effort that we're putting in, and we're still making some heroic efforts to keep that population afloat. But if we didn't do anything, it would be worse. And it's always a good learning experience to figure out how to do the best you can in a situation."



Darren scans the radio tracking tag of a Western pond turtle.

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Balancing work and life

"My son helps me to have a better work life balance. He likes to go outside and play baseball or football, and it's hard to do that if you're stuck to your computer."

"He's generally good about wanting to go out for hikes and things like that. He had an interest in going into all the different headwater streams in the Redwood Creek watershed, so we spent a lot of weekends going on different trails to get all the headwaters."

Reflecting on the importance of parks and open spaces

"During this COVID period, our open space areas have gotten way more use than they have in prior years. Everyone's going out to decompress. I'm so fortunate to live right next to open spaces near San Rafael, and it's been refreshing to see others appreciating that they're there. I encourage people to support efforts to protect them into the future."

Edited for brevity by Maritte O'Gallagher, May 2021

Further Reading

[San Francisco Bay Area Inventory & Monitoring Network \(https://www.nps.gov/im/sfan/index.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/im/sfan/index.htm):

[Streamflow \(https://www.nps.gov/im/sfan/streamflow.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/im/sfan/streamflow.htm)

[Rocky intertidal \(https://www.nps.gov/im/sfan/rocky-intertidal.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/im/sfan/rocky-intertidal.htm)

[Pacific Coast Science & Learning Center \(https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/index.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/index.htm):
[\(https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/coho-steelhead.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/coho-steelhead.htm)

[Coho & Steelhead \(https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/coho-steelhead.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/coho-steelhead.htm)

[California red-legged frogs \(https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/california-red-legged-frogs.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/california-red-legged-frogs.htm)

[Meet More Bay Area Park Scientists \(https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/scientist-profiles.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/scientist-profiles.htm)

[Western pond turtles headstart project \(https://www.parksconservancy.org/article/california-native-freshwater-turtle-returns-rodeo-valley-watershed\)](https://www.parksconservancy.org/article/california-native-freshwater-turtle-returns-rodeo-valley-watershed)

[Golden Gate National Recreation Area: Amphibians \(https://www.nps.gov/goga/learn/nature/amphibians.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/goga/learn/nature/amphibians.htm)

[Frequently Asked Coho Salmon Questions \(https://www.nps.gov/articles/frequently-asked-coho-salmon-questions_old.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/articles/frequently-asked-coho-salmon-questions_old.htm)

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