

Fergus Byrne met Owen Day in the Marshwood Vale, Dorset



Owen Day with one of the teams working to save coral in the Caribbean

My father was born in Devon, and my mother was born in Guernsey just before the German occupation. She was evacuated with her mother, brother and sister, and she spent the war in England. It was only at the end of the war that she met her father for the first time. My parents met in Guernsey when they were still students and married soon after in St Peter Port. My mother had been an art student at Brighton and moved to Aberdeen with my father where he did a PhD in epidemiology. They had very little money but managed to buy a small house in Peterculter where my sister and I were born. When I was one, we all moved to Australia where my father was a lecturer at the University of Canberra. My first memories are of koala bears, kangaroos, spiders, and a picnic when my mother pulled me away from a deadly brown snake that I nearly stepped on.

My parents were adventurous, we would often drive into the outback where my mother painted landscapes. In 1970, my father took us all to Papua New Guinea where he was part of team studying tropical diseases, including Kuru, a disease affecting tribal villages in the Highlands and transmitted by eating human brain during traditional burial ceremonies. I remember the rainforest with flying foxes and giant toads, but my most powerful memory is when my father took me snorkelling for the first time. I can remember it vividly to this day, putting my head underwater and seeing this unbelievable explosion of

small fish of every colour, as well as spectacular corals. It had a huge effect on me and awoke a lifelong passion for marine biology.

We moved to France when I was five. My father got a job with the World Health Organization in Lyon. My sister and I went to the local primary school and quickly spoke French to each other, much to our parents' amazement. Apart from a year in Washington, D.C., when I was 12, we lived in France on the outskirts of Lyon until I was 18. The French countryside was very wild back then, and I was obsessed with collecting anything related to nature. My room was a small museum. I had jars of animals I dissected in formalin and collections of insects, feathers, eggshells, fossils—whatever I found. Every summer, during the long French school holidays, we'd go to Guernsey where I spent my time fishing, building lobster pots, and developing a passion for the sea.

After passing the Baccalaureate, I applied to Oxford to study biochemistry, which meant a term cramming for the Oxbridge exam in an English boarding school in Norfolk. That was a real culture shock. After the Lycée in Lyon, where you could wear what you want, drink beers at lunchtime in the local bar, and were treated like an adult, suddenly, I was having to wear a jacket and tie, go to chapel in the morning and evening, and follow a strict timetable. I soon discovered there was a parallel world of illegal binge drinking and wild parties. I told my



Owen Day

French friends they weren't drinking enough—they were rather shocked.

After four years at Oxford I never wanted to see the inside of a laboratory again and needed to see the world. I joined a shipping company, who posted me to Antwerp—not quite the exotic destination I had hoped for. After a year I realized that it really wasn't what I wanted, and I decided to do a master's in marine biology at the University of Bangor in North Wales. I loved it. It was very international and the work was fascinating. I followed on with a PhD developing methods for rearing Dover sole in large numbers to restock the Irish Sea as part of a government programme with CEFAS.

It was while living on Anglesey that I met my wife, Suki, at a house party my sister organised. She was very beautiful, a great dancer, interested in the French philosopher and naturalist Rousseau and passionate about her work as a primary school teacher in a tough inner-city school in London. I was smitten. After many weekends and several holidays together, she agreed to marry me. We married in Dunkeld Cathedral and moved into a little house right on the Menai Straits, and had two boys, Alastair and Jamie. In 1999, we moved to Dorset to continue my work with CEFAS in their Weymouth office. My work on Dover sole became relevant to fish farmers in other countries, so I travelled to Spain, Greece, and Norway doing commercial research projects. The work was interesting but I didn't like the intensification of industrial fish farming and it's increasingly negative impact on animal welfare and the environment. Then, out of the blue, someone emailed me about a possible project in Trinidad and Tobago involving aquaculture and marine conservation. I jumped on it and hunted for funding, which I eventually got from a wealthy Trinidadian businessman and philanthropist. In September 2001, nine months after the birth of our daughter Phoebe, we found ourselves moving to the tiny Caribbean Island of Tobago, where we lived for seven and a half years.

I did many different projects, including seaweed farming, mapping coral reefs, helping local glass-bottom boat operators to manage the impact of tourism and ran educational programmes for students—it was very hands-on conservation. In 2004, our small organisation called the Buccoo Reef Trust, won the annual Environment Award from the World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations. That really helped with fund-raising, and we expanded our programmes

to employ 18 staff. Family life in Tobago was great fun; we made lifelong friends, and our children loved the freedom and excitement of life on a tropical island. But eventually it was time to leave, and in 2008 we returned to Dorset. Adjusting back to English life proved harder for Suki and me, surprisingly, than for our children who loved their new school and wider friend group.

I joined a firm of consultants who focused on assessing the current and future impacts of climate change in the Caribbean and helping governments develop policies and adaptation plans. Sadly, many of these plans are not being implemented, hindered by a lack of political will and insufficient funding – a problem that's all too familiar in richer country. In 2016, some of my colleagues and I set up the Centre for Livelihoods, Ecosystems, Adaptation and Resilience in the Caribbean (CLEAR), which focuses on more practical community-based interventions, and direct support for vulnerable fishing and farming communities. Poverty, especially in countries like Haiti, Jamaica and St Vincent, can make it much harder for communities to adapt to the profound impacts of climate change, like more intense hurricanes, coral bleaching, declining fisheries, sea level rise, prolonged droughts and accelerating soil erosion.

One of our programmes is to train fishermen to become coral gardeners, and set-up underwater nurseries where more resilient corals can be propagated and then replanted on the reefs. The coral gardeners get an income from our grants, and the coral restoration can be made a tourism attraction, where locals can generate additional revenue from tours of the nurseries and visitors planting corals. Unfortunately, much of the hard work was lost last year, when our corals amazingly survived a category 5 hurricane, but subsequently died because of the extreme marine heat wave that affected the Eastern Caribbean in late 2024. Sea water temperatures reached an unprecedented 31C, even down to 25m depth for several months. Our priority now is to identify the coral survivors, who are genetically more resilient, and keep propagating and outplanting them. While there is still hope to keep some corals alive, the reality is that coral reefs, as we know them, are unlikely to survive the current century.

Working all over the Caribbean for over 25 years has been an amazing experience and privilege. What has always inspired me, is the extraordinary resilience of often poor communities and their willingness to pull together for the common good. 