

## Libby (Elizabeth) Johns

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In 2005, when the previous “Women in Oceanography” issue was published, I was back to working full-time after spending 11 years in a part-time status while my three children were young. I had moved from strictly blue water physical oceanography, studying western boundary currents and inflow patterns into the Caribbean Sea, to interdisciplinary oceanography focused primarily on South Florida coastal waters and the effects of the Everglades Restoration.

Since that time, I have continued with my research in South Florida coastal oceanography, and have expended my interests to include fisheries oceanography, specifically, collaborating with scientists from NOAA’s Southeast Fisheries Science Center’s Early Life History group. We go to sea approximately once per year for several weeks and collect physical, chemical, and biological data, including net tows for larval fish. Our areas of interest have focused on the Florida Keys/Dry Tortugas, the Mexican and Belizean Yucatán, and the Northeast Caribbean Sea from Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands to the Lesser Antilles. The goal of this project is to better understand how regional circulation and water properties affect the abundance, distribution, and variety of larval reef fish, with an emphasis on economically important fish species. This information is then made available to resource managers who need to make decisions about such things as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and other fisheries-related topics. We are presently in the early staging process for a spring 2015 cruise that includes a chance of obtaining clearance to expand this work into Cuban coastal waters. This would be a significant advancement for our group and would fill a geographical gap in our knowledge of this area of the Caribbean and its connectivity with South Florida coastal waters.

I would say that one of the biggest challenges I have faced has been trying to be a caring, involved mother while pursuing a professional career. I think the key to this conundrum is to continually reassess how all of the components of life

fit together and to be willing to make changes as the need arises. For example, my children are now young adults pursuing their careers and their lives with great enthusiasm, so I find that I have more time to concentrate on my research goals. But I am very happy that I was able to be there for them when they were younger and needed more of my time. (It also didn’t hurt that I have an understanding husband who has always been willing to accept change.)

The other challenge that I faced in my career was making the transition from strictly physical oceanography to the kind of interdisciplinary, applied oceanography that I find most rewarding now. To be able to make this change took a bit of convincing and “salesmanship,” but I am thankful that my laboratory was able to see the value in this type of research and has been highly supportive of my various endeavors.

I think that my story makes a case for the value of not settling for the status quo, but rather to maintain a mindset that is constantly evaluating how the various parts of a happy and successful life can best complement each other. There are many choices available to women at all stages of life, and it is of great importance to make decisions purposefully and not be afraid of changing direction when necessary.

Libby is shown offshore of the island of Great Inagua, Bahamas, riding on the ship’s tender to join the NOAA Ship *Ronald H. Brown* for an interdisciplinary research cruise in the northern Caribbean Sea.

