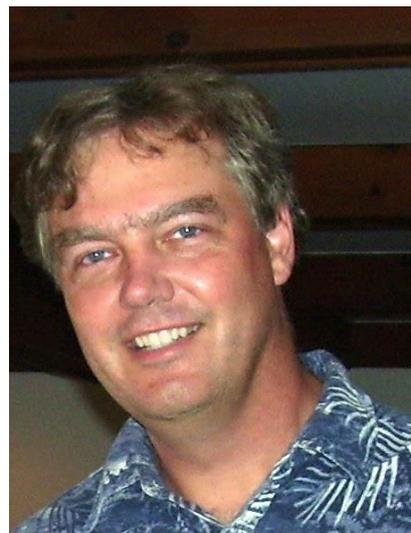


Interview with Bob Sluka, March 2015

Dr Bob Sluka has recently joined the CiS committee as the International Secretary, succeeding Prof Ard Louis in the role. Bob is a marine biologist and consults with a number of organisations, as well as being the lead scientist with A Rocha's Marine and Coastal Conservation programme. Emily Sturgess, the Development Officer, met him in Oxford to chat about his international life so far, and his hopes for his new role on the committee.

Tell us what you've been doing until now / What is your story so far?

I grew up in Detroit, the son of a fourth generation immigrant family, a typical American dream type of story. My great-grandparents were all born in Europe, primarily in the Czech area, Grandparents born in the US were workers, my dad the first one to university, and I was the first one to graduate school. So living that dream, I went off to the University of Miami to study Marine Biology – which is a big story in itself, because I had a love of the ocean from really early on, and started scuba diving when I was 13. I met my wife in Miami; she's an oboeist, so a classically trained musician. I didn't even know what an oboe was, she had to tell me – I'm a bit of a Barbarian! We met and married there at the University of Miami, and really had a passion for serving people. We were really involved there with ministry at university, through intervarsity, and then God called us to go overseas. So, in 1996 we left for the Republic of Maldives, and lived for about a year and a half in a little fishing village. Basically no one had ever met a Christian before, it was an Islamic republic. We ended up having to leave there, and we moved to India, and basically lived in South Asia for about ten years. Then, one of the charities we worked with wanted us to come here to England – their headquarters is here – so about nine years ago we moved into a little village in the Chiltern Hills, Chignor, and just really love getting involved there. And that's where I came in contact with Christians in Science, and with A Rocha as well, so God really used being here in England to expand my thinking and really used CiS and A Rocha, both, to help me think about the science-faith issues in a way I never have before. So it's been a very exciting journey.



What do you do for fun? What are your major interests outside of work?

I guess I would have to summarise: my family, really! We've got the four kids: boy, 14, two girls, 12 and 11, and another boy, 8, so we're ferrying them around! But also playing with them – I've really taken to heart people saying when you're dying you're not going to regret time with your kids. So we go walking on the weekends, go camping, play games, the kids are into sports and music, and active in the local church. We've seen a lot of the UK: we've been here nine years and have been to Europe for one day! All of our holidays have been in the UK, so we've tried to really explore. We really love travelling around the UK.

Who have been the most important role models in your life? / Who inspires you?

Well, it'd be a cliché, but of course, my Dad. I think because of his faith, and he's always been there for me. My mum, as well, but my dad especially. I realise later what he was doing, that he was turning me onto people like Francis Schaeffer, with a more Philosophical way of thinking about the scripture.

That lead into a lot of things, opened me up to a lot of things I learned here in England. And also, my Professor at University, her name was Kathleen Sullivan Sealey. She was also Christian, Catholic background, and had a strong faith; and the way she conducted the lab as a group, not independent, taught me a lot of things. I met her, actually, when I was at high school, at a visit to the university, and I went on a field trip with her to Australia for six weeks, so we camped out in the outback together. Then I became her PHD student, and we'd go off to remote islands in the Bahamas and live on boats. And when you spend a lot of time out in the field together...a lot of her rubbed off on me, and I appreciate that.

What challenges, if any, have you come across as a Christian and a Scientist?

I think, interestingly at university – maybe because of my professor having a faith, and the university wasn't antagonistic to my faith - I didn't have that typical story that lots of people have. I think, I had to struggle with some of those more typical conservative American evangelical sorts of issues.

I think what I would say is really hard right now, is how do you be a good Christian partner with other researchers and organisations that haven't got a Christian ethos? How do you deal with people when you feel like maybe you're getting taken advantage of? To be free with your data, and sharing knowledge in a way that is really Christ-like. I think that is the struggle right now. I mean, we're doing really cool stuff with A Rocha, but how do you promote that without being so self-promoting that it turns into something that's un-Christian? A Rocha is somewhat unique in the Christian environmental world where we're really trying to work hard with all the major non-Christian groups; so how do we partner when sometimes there are different values? And not that everybody's bad, or being mistreated, but it's just learning to really live as a Christian in that environment. Especially in giving up data, and letting people use it, and making sure people get credit even if you don't – and I guess suffering in some ways because of that.

How has your faith helped you as a scientist, or vice versa? / What has your research taught you about God, or vice versa?

I think when I really felt God's presence in my science is the moments of awe, wonder and beauty: almost mountain-top experiences in the ocean with creatures, and sharing that in community. I remember with my son, going through a rock pool and seeing a mantis shrimp, and it was there and then it was gone, and it's like 'Did you see that?!' But I think that's really helped me turn my science into worship, sort of direct it to God.

I think my faith has helped my science in how I've chosen to do projects that are a real holistic way of thinking about them: not just protecting animals but doing it in a way that really blesses people, and being intentional about my faith and trying to intentionally choose areas where maybe I might run into people who might never have met a Christian before. Something like 85% of non-Christians in the world will never meet a Christian – it's a huge number of people, so it's an opportunity to go to these remote places when you have a chance. We lived in the Maldives and most people had never met a Christian. They had certain preconceptions, and they'd been told what we were like, but it was an opportunity to live out our lives with those people.

What has been the most interesting thing you have discovered or worked on in your research career?

I'm not sure if I've 'discovered' anything! For me, I'm still fascinated by Marine Protected Areas, it's what I keep coming back to. In A Rocha our big new Marine and Coastal conservation programme, our main theme is on marine protected areas, and it's a beautiful example of how when you take care of things God's made, and you allow them to function ecologically how they were meant to be,

then there's all this blessing that flows out of it. Not only do you see beauty, not only do you see diversity and abundance, but it actually flows out of these protected areas, and it actually blesses coastal fishing people, for example. I think it's just a beautiful example of how when we really take care of things well – y'know, we always say 'take care of the environment it'll take care of people' – sometimes it's hard to find good examples of that, and these are really good examples. It's always a pleasure to jump in some place where it's been protected, because you can tell the difference.

What science-faith book/resources have you most enjoyed or found most helpful?

I thought about this, and it's going to be maybe a strange list, particular to my field. I think to me the science-faith dialogue has always been dominated by some basic questions which actually to me aren't that interesting. The interesting thing to me is: 'How do I be a marine biologist and a Christian?'

So for me, Planetwise by Dave Bookless was really important in the biblical understanding of taking care of the environment, and why marine conservation is actually worship to God. Another one was more on some of those traditional views, Simon Conway Morris's Life's Solution, which talks about convergence. That was really powerful, I was really taken by that book. Another one was called A Moral Climate by Michael Northcott, which basically looks at the philosophical and theological thinking behind climate change issues, and it was really challenging to me because he's coming from a very different perspective, so it made me really think. And lastly, and this is not specifically a science-faith book, but N.T. Wright's Surprised by Hope, because it was the thing that tipped me over into a paradigm-shift. All the stuff I was hearing about in Christians in science, and A Rocha, reading that book was like, 'Boom!', I'd put on a new set of glasses. It helps me to see the science world very differently, and really interpret it in terms of faith and especially related to the new creation kind of thinking. It was really huge, and significantly affects my science-faith understanding, even though it wasn't intended as a science-faith book.

Is there a scientific discovery you wish had been yours?

I struggled with this – there's nothing I think 'I wish I'd done that'. Except, in my case, we were in the Maldives right at a time when there was a major bleaching event in the Indian Ocean, in 1998. And I saw it, I was in the water, and one day everything was healthy and a couple of days later everything was white and bleached. Weeks later we had to leave the country for various reasons. Subsequently, that event has proved to be really important in understanding the ecology of coral reefs in the Indian Ocean, and so I feel like I missed out. I would have been right there, I would have been able to track it over time. So I always wish I had been able to really work on that thing – it's a missed opportunity.

What would you be doing if you weren't a scientist?

I would be a chef! I love food. Sometimes a lot of the projects that I work on are so long, open ended, never finishing; and with science there's always the next thing, so you feel like you never end. Cooking is really creative: you make it, someone eats it, hopefully someone else washes up, and you're done. So I think there's a sense of completion, and a sense of beauty with the flavours and creation of something new. I'm not good enough to be a chef, but I think I would aspire towards it if I weren't a scientist.

And finally, what are your hopes for your new role as International Secretary with CiS?

I'm still really trying to figure out what the role entails; but I think, rather than trying to create some other things that we do and trying to create something international, to me, we already do all this great stuff with Christians in Science, so how do we get that to a wider audience? I'm someone who is not British, and I've hugely benefitted, but I've benefitted because I've been here. There are people like me sitting in all these places around the world who could really be blessed, and their science and faith enhanced by the projects that we're already doing; and so how do we extend the reach of CIS to different places and get access to people? So that's something that I'll be hoping to explore in the next six months – how do we extend our reach and bring blessing to the ends of the earth, as Christ commanded, through what we're doing.