A sustainable seafood hero

For his commitment to the School’s global mission, and dedication to the conservation and protection of ocean health, Tobias Aguirre is the 2018 Outstanding GPS Alumnus

By Rachel Hommel | GPS News

Growing up in coastal Santa Cruz, Calif., and just a stone’s throw away from one of the world’s leading marine institutions, Tobias Aguirre ’05 never would have guessed he would be named a Seafood Watch Hero by the Monterey Bay Aquarium for leading the way towards a healthier planet.
A thought leader in the sustainable seafood movement, his nonprofit sustainable seafood consultancy FishWise works on both environmental sustainability and social responsibility, with a deep understanding that the world’s fisheries are both key to the long-term viability of our planet but also the food security and livelihoods of more than one billion people each day.

Creating scalable models of business engagement, he has built one of the world’s preeminent sustainable seafood organizations, empowering the industry to become champions for the ocean.

“I am nominating Aguirre because of his professional leadership and achievement in the very complex world of international ocean conservation,” applauded David Robertson, director of career services at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS). “He is making a huge impact in this critical environmental and humanitarian challenge.”

It’s for this reason, and his enduring support of the School, that Aguirre was selected as the 2018 Outstanding GPS Alumnus.

An Entrepreneurial Spirit

Searching for a meaningful summer internship experience after his first year at GPS, he discovered FishWise in his hometown of Santa Cruz. With fellowship support, he was offered the opportunity to develop business solutions for pressing environmental problems.

“My passion for conservation and sustainability really came about through my time at GPS. I came into the program really open minded as to what I wanted to do in life,” said Aguirre.
In his second year, he was able to tailor his classes to meet his newfound passion and learned as much as he could about the state of our oceans and innovative solutions to protect them. After graduation, he began a tireless commitment to setting the seafood industry on a more sustainable and responsible course, with an increasing focus on the people that both support and are dependent upon global fisheries.

“I remember writing a case study about FishWise for Professor Peter Gourevitch’s class on corporate social responsibility. It was an opportunity to delve deep into the issues and encouraged me to put all my eggs in this basket because I believed in the organization and that it was tackling timely issues. Since then, it’s been an amazing journey from intern to CEO.”

With a collaborative approach to conservation, FishWise is now working with retail industry executives, trade associations, funders, government officials and NGO leaders, all with the hope of improved environmental performance. From partnerships with Target (1,900+ stores nationally) and Albertsons Companies (2,300+ stores) to USAID and the David and Lucile Packard, Walton Family and Gordon and Betty Moore foundations, Aguirre has built an impressive roster of partners to help solve the complex world of seafood sustainability.

“We are dedicated to assisting the industry in implementing an ambitious but achievable common vision for seafood,” said Aguirre. “We want to bring the human side of seafood into the conversation. We have an intimate connection between the world’s fisheries and the people that bring it to us.”

What was once a nascent movement when Aguirre got started, the sustainable
seafood community has grown into an international effort. Much of this growth can be traced back to the creation of the Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions, a partnership of more than 40 NGOs globally that tackles the biggest issues in the field. Aguirre was a founding member of the Alliance and continues to serve the group via its advisory board, one of many such steering committees he works on to guide the larger movement.

Using the GPS Toolkit

Studying nonprofit management and business strategy, Aguirre was drawn to the interdisciplinary design of the GPS curriculum, citing courses in corporate strategy and the environment as playing a critical role in building his career.

“I enjoyed being able to sample a lot of different topics at GPS and identify a field as I went,” said Aguirre. “My undergraduate degree in history from Stanford University gave me a strong foundation in understanding where we have come. I wanted to bring that level of understanding into the present and use it to inform how I can make useful contributions to the world.

Aguirre applauds GPS for its high caliber faculty and training, as well as the
friendships formed inside and outside the classroom that paved the way for a successful career with humanitarian impact.

“Professor Roger Bohn’s managerial decision-making class was fantastic,” reminisces Aguirre. “Here I am a CEO with 30 staff and a $4.1 million-dollar budget...a far cry from what we started with. Each day, I make decisions that draw upon the lessons learned in my classes. So much of what I learned at GPS is in my DNA now.”

Excited to reunite with his GPS friends and faculty, Aguirre lives by the quote “you are brilliant and the Earth is hiring.” Inspired by the work of his fellow cohort, he is grateful for the memories and collaborative nature of the School.

“I felt completely at home with my classmates, I was inspired and challenged by them,” said Aguirre. “We had a two-year window to explore all these topics together and I formed lasting friendships that I still carry with me.”

When fellow alumnus Jeremey Eckstein ’05 was asked why he should be honored, he cites Aguirre as someone who has not only made waves in the seafood industry, but throughout the policy world.

“He puts the entire GPS toolbox to work: he engages in international policy, economics and politics,” said Eckstein. “If you were looking for a well-rounded, high achieving alumnus, who makes use of the broad and diverse set of skills that the GPS program taught us, Tobias would be it.”

Register to attend the GPS and ISP Alumni Weekend Reunion on June 2, when Aguirre will be recognized as the 2018 Outstanding GPS Alumnus.

An alumni selection committee reviewed nominations for and determined the winner of the 2018 Outstanding GPS Alumna or Alumnus. Thank you to the following alumni who represent board and non-board members from different regions as well as different degree programs:

- Darcy Cook, MPIA ’91
- Peter Moritzburke, MPIA ’96
- Dennis-Michael Broussard, MPIA ’08
- Chihiro Fujimoto, MAS-IA ’11
- Raghu Madala, MAS-IA ’13
- Ziwen Han, BA/MIA ‘16
- Taseul Joo, MIA ‘17