

Danni Washington: My “Messenger Mocha Mermaid” Activist Hero

Allison Luo: Host/Reporter/Journalist

Danni Washington: Messenger Mermaid Activist Hero

Allison: So, my first question is: Do you have a favorite sea animal?

Danni Washington: Yes, orcas - killer whales! They have been my favorite since day one. I know it's a bit clichéd because everybody loves whales and dolphins, but they really are, truly, my favorite animal on the planet. They're the reason why I even decided to go into ocean conservation and to study marine biology. I see them as a Gateway Animal – the animal that's supposed to catch a human's attention so that we can care about the ocean. They're so intelligent, they're beautiful. The way that they socialize and work in a pod, as a family, really just impresses me so much and there's so little that we understand about them. And they've always been a source of inspiration and fascination for me.

Allison: That's cool!

Danni Washington: And most people don't know that orcas are the largest member of the dolphin family, so they're not technically whales.

Allison: Wait, they aren't whales?

Danni Washington: Yeah, well, I mean, if you look at it like you're looking at the layout within the animal kingdom, you'll see that there are [toothed whales](#), right? So [orcas] are considered a part of that family, but toothed whales are also considered to be dolphins. It's a bit mixed in! But they [orcas] aren't [baleen whales](#), like a [humpback whale](#) or a [blue whale](#), they're totally different, they're toothed! So yeah, [orcas] are the largest member of the dolphin family.

Allison: Who or what inspired you to create your [About Danni — Danni Washington | Science Communicator](#), [Sea Youth Rise Up](#) and [The Big Blue & You](#) organizations? (See Works Cited section)

Danni Washington: Ah, okay, so the first organization that I created was [The Big Blue & You](#) back when I was 21 years old and I co-founded it with my mom, Michelle, and we were inspired by the idea of connecting young people in our community in Miami and South Florida in general. Connecting them to the ocean using art and science. And so this idea was just a passion project for us. We wanted to create a space where kids from marginalized and underserved communities have a chance to meet the ocean. That's where [The Big Blue & You](#) arose and that

was 15 years ago, and we will be celebrating our 15th anniversary in September. Wild! Since then we've served thousands of children here in South Florida and we work with young people in different places around the world as well. Now we're focused primarily on engaging our team volunteers and a new program called Plastic Free Miami, where young people are the catalyst to speak to business owners, hotels and restaurateurs to encourage them to get rid of the single-use plastics in their restaurants and establishments and to replace them with compostable or reusable items instead. It's been a really cool evolution watching that program grow. We also have our signature festival that we've produced over the years called Art by the Sea or artsea and it's a celebration of the ocean using Art and Science where we connected scientists from our community marine scientists and marine science students with local artists to create activities, hands-on activities, for kids who come out to the festival with their families to learn about the ocean to love on the ocean and to just get inspired by the ocean. Using every art form and science, you know, method of science we were able to bring together this [art] festival that was just so much fun and engaging, not only for the kids but also for the adults as well. So you got yoga and theater and paddle board and kayaking, dance, visual arts, mural arts, all combined in one day so kids can make memories near the ocean and to know that it's a safe place and that it belongs to all of us.

Allison: I like that, I would want to go if I lived in Florida.

Danni Washington: I would love for you to go if you could.

Allison: Do you have any particular climate hero or climate heroes? Are they someone less known or someone super famous?

Danni Washington: I have quite a few climate heroes that inspire me daily. I'd say the first climate hero that came into my consciousness and was really a major role model for me was [Dr. Sylvia Earle](#), and she still is very much a role model. She's an oceanographer marine biologist who has taken the ocean, and using her platforms, she has been able to amplify the voice of the ocean through her documentary on Netflix and lots of other projects speaking engagements. I met her for the first time when I was 17 years old at a sleepaway, like an overnight experience in South Florida at a museum and she came to speak as a National Geographic Explorer in Residence, which she still is today. And yeah, just having a simple conversation with her really made me feel like "Oh I could do this" because I saw a woman like her working in marine science and ocean conservation and so she's been a constant inspiration for me. I would say the other person who is really important and inspiring at the moment is a woman named [Leah Thomas](#). She's the founder of intersectional environmentalist so her story is really interesting because in 2020 during the height of the pandemic when we were all still in lockdown, [Leah Thomas] created a post on Instagram that basically just stated that you know Environmentalist for Black Lives this was during the whole [George Floyd](#) situation. So it was the first time I think that a lot of people had seen that you know environmentalist people who love nature and love the outdoors and love the ocean, you know, needed to have a stake and a voice in the movement to protect black lives. From there, that post she shared went viral and then she created an organization called [Intersectional Environmentalist](#) along with a few other co-founders, and now

has built a huge social media brand that is amplifying voices that we didn't really hear traditionally in environmentalism, I think, for many years since the 1970s, when let's say Earth Day was established and people really started paying attention to the state of the environment. A lot of times the voices that were the loudest in the room were those who were not people of color, right? And we see that so many, you know, communities around the world are the first to be impacted by the climate crisis and other environmental injustices. And so having her in the space being able to talk about those stories and to give light to it but also add a really awesome art flavor to what she does in the media that they create, I mean it's fantastic and I'm definitely proud to be a part of that organization, and to see them grow in Florida has been really really cool.

Allison: That's really cool. In your opinion, what is the most pressing marine environmental/conservationist issue right now?

Danni Washington: The most pressing? Yeah, so that's a tough question, but what I would say the thing that is most pressing, and we still have an opportunity to help make better or to fix, would be deep sea mining. There are a lot of companies interested right now in mining the deep sea – seabed because there are these clusters of minerals that are called ‘nodules’ that are sitting at the bottom in these ecosystems that can be harvested for precious metals that we use in batteries for electric cars and our cell phones. This is a relatively recent finding; they’ve known about it [‘nodules’] since the ‘70s but no one had actively looked at ways to harvest these ‘nodules’ from the deep sea, but now there's a huge interest because of the growing economy of electric vehicles and different things that require batteries. So you know this is something that's growing quickly but, here's the caveat, we don't know what will happen if we disturb these deep sea ecosystems, which haven't been disturbed by human beings, like I mean ever. So they've been down there, you know, in a completely different world in the deep sea, because we can't access it with our human bodies but now there's technology being developed that can. So we're at this crossroad where governments and policymakers are having to decide is this going to be legal, and whether or not we can disturb these habitats and we don't know what the repercussions are, so it is a very kind of troubling idea that we would be willing to go there without knowing the repercussions. For me, it's on the leaning edge of how we can help, because in my opinion, I think we shouldn't be deep sea mining. I think we should find ways to *recycle* the minerals that we've used so far and that we have currently in our technology. Because the ocean and its stability is what we depend on, our lives depend on the health of the ocean and without it being a safe place, a place where the ecosystems are still intact, who knows what could happen. So yeah, that's that to me is probably the most pressing issue at the moment right now.

Allison: Has anyone already started deep sea mining or is it just in its early phase?

Danni Washington: No, they have already been [mining], and there are a couple of companies that have been testing techniques on how to do it and have built harvesting machines so they can send it [machines] to the bottom to collect these ‘nodules’ so it's [mining] already in motion. I think it's just a matter, it's up to our governments now to decide what to do because here's the other complicated part of it. [‘Nodules’] are found in some of the deep sea areas that they are

interested in harvesting in, and [these] are areas of the ocean that are considered the high seas. This is a place where no country really owns it. Right now within global regulations, each nation is given about 200 nautical miles off of their coastline as their exclusive economic zone place. This is the place in the ocean where that country or Nation can do whatever they decide to do with it, but beyond those two hundred nautical miles that's kind of like no man's land. So that's what creates the complications and just deciding who's going to make that decision. Who's going to say "this is for you" and "you can harvest here but you can't" kind of thing. So that's a really interesting debate and conversation that's happening right now.

Allison: Would mining the minerals in the ocean for the EV cars still be better for the environment than using the combustion [petrol] engine cars that we use right now?

Danni Washington: And see, there you go. That is a great question, that is the question that is kind of like weighing on the scale right now. It's like 'no we don't want to continue to use combustion engines because of the climate impact' and that we don't want to continue burning fossil fuel because we want to transition to a cleaner and greener economy but it's impossible without having those resources. So it's a bit of a trade-off and I don't have the answer to that at the moment. I mean I know for sure that I would like to see our world reduce and hopefully eliminate having to burn fossil fuels to move around. But yeah, having to decide if we then destroy the deep sea ecosystems that we rely on, that's another, that's another challenge. So it's really tough, you know, because the ocean is a place of great resource. But it's not going to last forever. Those things, you know, the research we pull from the ocean are very important and critical to our well-being and so we just have to figure out what's the balance, how do we take and extract what we need without completely exploiting it [our oceans] if that makes any sense?

Allison: Yeah, it does. You do a lot of activism, out of all of your activist roles, what do you feel is the most impactful thing you have done?

Danni Washington: The most impactful thing that I've done so far? I've been on the planet for 36 years and I would say the most impactful for me would be the young people that I've helped inspire, whether it was me at a summit or a youth gathering, speaking on stage, or through the television shows that I've worked on, that are focused on uplifting, you know, science voices, diverse voices, and in environmentalism – all of that. I think that's probably the most meaningful for me, because I'll receive letters and emails and messages from young people like you, [who] that have told me that they felt like this was confirmation – whatever that is – and that to me is the most impactful.

Allison: I like that answer.

Danni Washington: Thanks!

Allison: Ok, so this is like a similar question [to earlier] but what area of your activism gives you the most satisfaction and/or happiness?

Danni Washington: Hmm... Something that gives me the most satisfaction... Hmm... I think it's taking people no matter what age they are, taking people that I know, or that I meet, to experience the ocean for the first time. That's like the best feeling in the world to see that awe and wonder on their faces and their whole expression. But also a door has been opened in their consciousness where they're like "This is a magical place and I love the ocean." The transition from fear to joy, there is no price you can put on that. It's so important that all of us as individual human beings find that thing that leads to that 'spark', and I think the ocean is definitely a catalyst for a lot of people that could change mindsets, and behaviors, and outlooks on our experience here on planet Earth in a major way. So, if I can be the person to help usher that individual into understanding how [inter]connected we are to the ocean and to fall in love with it, that for me is the most satisfying.

Allison: I read on your website that you were involved in a lot of projects all around the world. Do you plan on doing more of those?

Danni Washington: Oh yeah, I absolutely love traveling and going to new places, new countries, and meeting new people and understanding new cultures. I would love to continue moving around the world, and working on different projects that are connecting different cultures to the ocean and to the environment [and], of course that comes at a cost. Travel is definitely carbon heavy and so I try to find ways to help offset that carbon output. I'm primarily focused on investing in blue carbon. Blue carbon is this idea that is relatively new but not really in the science world. It's an idea that specific marine ecosystems along our coastlines around the world are extremely efficient at absorbing carbon from the atmosphere and from the water. So when you look at kelp forests, mangrove forests, seagrass beds, salt marshes these are places where we're seeing carbon being stored and held. I see it as a major solution that it hasn't fully been tapped yet and so on an individual level, you can personally invest in restoring those ecosystems through different organizations that do that right now, but we can also see corporations and companies doing it on a bigger scale, which is what I'm really pushing for these days, so as I travel the world as I continue to meet people who are also passionate about the ocean. I've been trying to plant the seed of just exploring what blue carbon's all about and look at it, as you know, from the fact that the ocean is our greatest climate hero and if we can invest in these kind of ecosystems, and make sure that they're restored we're going to be in like a different, just a different, level of mitigating the climate crisis. And it's within our reach. You know, when you think about the deep sea, again we were talking about that before, the deep sea is so far, so out of reach for so many people, but our coastlines are just right there – that's the interface between humanity and the ocean as a whole. It's available to us; we just have to invest in it. We have to recruit more people to be involved with restoring those places and, yeah, just doing it on a large scale.

Allison: For the blue carbon thing, does it suck in the carbon?

Danni Washington: Yeah, you know about photosynthesis right? Yeah, so trees and plants on land will take in carbon dioxide and use that as fuel to help produce their own sugars, and then as a byproduct of that process, still produce oxygen which we breathe. Most people don't even know that over 50% of the oxygen that we're breathing right now, every other breath, [from] the oxygen in that breath, was produced by phytoplankton in the ocean. Now when it comes to blue carbon I'm not specifically referring to the phytoplankton or marine plants that do the same process, but underwater or near water, I mean, there's a lot of studies going on still to really nail down the stats, but something wild like, you know, [mangrove forests](#), for example, or [kelp forests](#), are able to sequester 50 times more carbon dioxide than trees on land. Wild! So, if we can restore those, okay, like kelp forests for me are interesting because California, for example, has lost 90% of its kelp forests in the last 100 years and that's because of habitat degradation, you know, pollution coming from the mainland, difference in ocean temperatures rising like a multitude. Also, over hunting of sea otters is [also] a big deal in that they removed that apex predator out of that ecosystem and it destroyed the forest. And then it destroyed the forest so there are many, many things that we can see with kelp but the good news is that giant kelp, at least that specific species, can grow up to a foot a day. It's one of the fastest growing marine plants, or plants in general in the world. Incredible. So, yeah, it gives me a lot of hope to think about blue carbon as one of our main efforts as human beings to help slow down the process of climate change. We know that things are going to run its course [as] the carbon has already been put into the atmosphere, But now it's up to us to figure out really innovative ways that nature teaches us already how to sequester it, how to pull it back in.

Allison: So like, going back to traveling, what's the favorite place, your favorite place that you've been to?

Danni Washington: That I've been to? Oh gosh, that's another hard question. Well, when it comes to like being in the ocean, I would say my favorite place would be [Papua New Guinea](#) because it was the wildest diving that I've ever done in my life! And I went back in 2012, so it's been a long time and I stayed on a liveaboard which is, you know, both for you to sleep on and then you dive everyday like four or five times a day! And so I did that for seven days and there were no other dive boards out in the water. It was just us – a small group of divers that were there and we had the reefs all to ourselves. They were covered in coral, covered in [anemones](#). We basically, I mean, we saw so many different species of clownfish that I never thought I would see in real life. [Cuttlefish](#), sharks, sea turtles, it was incredible. The diversity was tremendous.

Allison: Ok so if you had ten-twenty words to describe the critical work you do what would you say?

Danni Washington: Communicating science and information about nature in creative ways to inspire humanity to protect what's left. How many words is that? I didn't count! I want to say it's almost twenty. Maybe I went a little over. It might be a little over but maybe you can cut a couple of those out. Cool.

Allison: Is there anything else you want me to specifically highlight in my writing about what you do?

Danni Washington: I think it's important to say you know a lot of times people are very, well, they're not confused about what I do, they just feel like they always ask me, "Like so what exactly do you do?" or "I feel like you're doing a lot of things at once?". It's true, I am working on a lot of different projects at once! But my job is very similar to, let's say Bill Nye the Science Guy. He's a great example, someone that I've emulated and also look up to but also want to expand on it. He's hosted science shows, he had a bachelor's degree like me in a field of STEM. He went to engineering school, I went to school for Marine Science and Biology and then now he uses his platform as an activist, where he's constantly talking about the climate crisis, and figuring out ways for humanity, once again, to use their critical thinking skills and connection to STEM to solve this crisis. I would say maybe you could make a light comparison there [to Bill Nye] perhaps to give people a better idea of what I do. And then you can also add that I'm a mermaid, I'm a mocha mermaid. I'm a messenger basically, in a nutshell. I'm a messenger for the ocean.

Allison: A [The/My] Messenger Mocha Mermaid.

Danni Washington: Yes!
