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Innovation & Investment
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New IoA chief at Stirling seeks new paths for aquaculture



26 February 2019 Nicki Holmyard



Selina Stead keen on fostering collaborative research partnerships



Prof. Selina Stead, new head of the Institute of Aquaculture at Stirling University. Photo by John Millard.

Professor Selina Stead, the new leader of the Institute of Aquaculture (IoA) at the University of Stirling in Scotland, was thrilled to be head-hunted for the position, but it is one that she is eminently qualified for.

“It is probably the most exciting opportunity I have ever been offered, and it brings all my knowledge and experience together,” she told *The Advocate*.

Prof. Stead starts March 1 and will be in charge of 180 staff and students, and in regular contact with a global network of partners and businesses.

She joins IoA from Newcastle University, where she was dean, public orator and professor of marine governance and environmental science. Professor Stead is also UK Government Chief Scientific Advisor for the Marine Management Organisation and negotiated with Stirling to retain this role.

Describing herself as an “eternal optimist,” Stead admitted that she had been focused as a child, deciding that she wanted to be a marine biologist at the age of 12, and choosing her degree subject and university at age 14.

Aquaculture has had a bad time in the press but there are so many good stories to tell about the conservation angle, stock regeneration and enhancement, and the industry’s contribution to enhancing biodiversity, and that is without talking about its ability to feed the world.

She sailed through a bachelor’s degree in marine biology and oceanography and a master’s in fisheries science at the University of North Wales, Bangor.

“I wanted to do a Ph.D. in sharks, because I was fascinated by them, but my supervisor advised that it might limit my career prospects. Instead, I took up studying salmon physiology at IoS, working with Marine Scotland, and this proved to be a good move as the Scottish salmon industry was developing rapidly at that time,” she said.

Her studies led her to posts as director of aquaculture and manager of a finfish hatchery, followed by director of marine resource management at Aberdeen University.

“I was the only natural scientist in an agriculture and economics group and became more and more aware of the need to gain a better understanding of land and water interactions, business enterprise and policy. Running a successful aquaculture operation is not just about feeding fish,” she said.

A move to Newcastle University allowed Stead to develop more specialist knowledge of international sustainable development of the seas and oceans, and to increasingly become involved in integrated coastal zone management. She continued to focus on food security, looking at ways to improve integration between aquaculture and fisheries systems.

During a stellar career, Professor Stead has also chaired the Scottish Government's Marine Science Advisory Board, served as president of the European Aquaculture Society, is a founder and current member of the International Council for Exploration of the Sea's Socio-Economic Aquaculture Working Group, and served on the board of the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) and the committee of the North Eastern Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authority.

"I am joining the team at Stirling at an exciting time. The Institute will celebrate its 40th birthday in 2020, and a £17 million (\$22 Million) package for a new aquaculture hub was recently announced under a City Region Deal. The hub will provide four aquatic research facilities that mimic different marine and freshwater environments and will facilitate many research and development opportunities that will help to grow the export of Scottish aquaculture skills and products," she said.

The IoA is the largest of its kind in the world, providing high-quality research, technology development and consultancy. It works with governments, regulatory bodies, industry, pharmaceutical suppliers, fish farmers and supply chains to tackle global problems of food security, hunger and sustainability through aquaculture.

It is also highly rated for its innovative aquaculture and marine biology degrees and continuing professional development courses. Research and expertise ensure that teaching is at the forefront of new science in aquaculture.

"I am aware of a great responsibility in maintaining the excellent global reputation of the institute, and I am looking forward to exploring how this can be developed over the next decade or so, and the value proposition increased. My first task will be to get to know the staff, understand their aspirations and that of the industry, to identify strengths and skills gaps, and to see how the current research programmes align with Scottish, UK and international needs for aquaculture," said Prof. Stead.

"I have so many ideas about what could be done, and I am sure my colleagues have too, so I am keen to foster a creative environment where we can tease them all out."

She believes that there is also much to be gained from networking and collaborative research opportunities with the growing number of aquaculture and related services companies relocating to the university's Innovation Park. Landcatch, [AquaGen](#), Aqualife Services, Hydro International and the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre (SAIC) are just a few of the companies that benefit from the vibrant environment and the proximity of world-class research facilities.

One aspect that Professor Stead is passionate about, is finding different ways to tell the aquaculture story.

"Aquaculture has had a bad time in the press but there are so many good stories to tell about the conservation angle, stock regeneration and enhancement, and the industry's contribution to enhancing biodiversity, and that is without talking about its ability to feed the world," she said.

Asked what she felt about the current focus on promoting the role of women in aquaculture, Prof. Stead explained that while she is keen to see many more women working in the industry, she looks forward to a time when they are included as part of a broader and inclusive environment, and the subject does not come up.

"That doesn't mean to say that women don't benefit from mentoring; they are not always the best at putting themselves forward for more senior positions, so I am keen to support those interested. I was involved at Newcastle in a very successful mentoring project to encourage greater involvement by women," she said.

Stirling's Institute of Aquaculture is about to benefit from the appointment of this clever, insightful lady, who is a karate black belt and who will be working closely with other strong women on the campus, including Professor Maggie Cusack, the Dean of Natural Sciences, and Dr. Heather Jones, the Chief Executive of SAIC.

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Nicki Holmyard has written about the seafood industry for longer than she cares to remember! A committed pescetarian, she is also a partner in the UK's first fully offshore rope-grown mussel farm.

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