



Meet a Paleontologist

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NFD Kid's Page Interview...

What is your job, and what do you study?

My interests combine both paleontology and marine biology through the study of modern and ancient life. In particular, I specialize in paleoecology by exploring the interactions of mostly marine invertebrates and their environments. For example, I use shells of snails and clams for examining evolution in the fossil record and for addressing conservation issues in present day habitats. Teaching is primarily what I do in the university setting including courses in paleontology, geology for non-majors, and integrated life and earth sciences for pre-service education students. I am happiest when I get to share my joy for paleontology, so any activity in which I can guide others in discovering the fossil record is extremely rewarding.

What are you working on now?

I am currently working with colleagues and students on understanding changes that occurred in the marine realm prior to the impact of humans on ecosystems along the U.S. East Coast. We are studying diversity, abundance, life modes, and predator-prey interactions in fossil assemblages before and after extinction episodes that happened naturally over the last few million years.



Dr. Christy Visaggi collecting ammonites along the Jurassic Coast in southern England.



Dr. Visaggi excavating 35 million year old marine fossils during her paleontology class field trip in central Georgia.

Where did you go to school? What were some of your favorite classes that you took?

In high school, I studied fossils briefly as part of a geology class that I took for fun. Then in college, I enrolled in biology and geology courses, and in fact attended a paleontology class while visiting campus before I had even started at Colgate University. I did research during my graduate years at Syracuse University and the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Some of my favorite classes have included a variety of courses in geochemistry, stratigraphy, zoology, ecology, and evolution, as well as micropaleontology. However, field-based courses involving mapping, research, or snorkeling such as in the Bahamas are particularly memorable.

Was there an experience you had that made you realize you wanted to be a paleontologist?

I found my first fossil at an early age playing on the gravel driveway at my house in New Jersey. My family started visiting museums and going on fossil collecting fieldtrips with regional clubs. I didn't realize then that I'd pursue a career in paleontology, but I continued to follow that path by seeking opportunities to explore fossils more in high school, college, and beyond. I sought summer jobs at museums and national parks, participated in research endeavors, published my findings, mentored students of my own, and can now officially call myself a paleontologist!

What is your most memorable experience working with fossils?

There are so many! Some of my favorites include finding shark teeth as a child with friends and family, excavating dolphin and whale skulls along the renowned Calvert Cliffs via an internship, and doing fieldwork in Patagonia on Charles Darwin's birthday below cliffs he famously studied 175 years ago. One particularly memorable experience was during my work conducting surveys at Amistad National Recreation Area. I felt so accomplished, in that despite not yet being done with school, I was the single lead expert on fossils while at the park. Mapping new localities, identifying specimens, and educating others on paleontological resources in the park provided me with a remarkable opportunity that also boosted my confidence in pursuing my career goals.

Do you have any advice for aspiring paleontologists?

Absolutely! Take courses in biology and geology, develop strong skills in math and writing, seek opportunities for experiences beyond school such as through museums, labs, and national parks, and don't be afraid to ask questions! There is so much left for us to learn from the fossil record.

