



## Q&A

with *Dr Michael Grenfell*

### WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THIS CAREER?

I love nature, and I am particularly fascinated about how landscapes are shaped by the work of water, and how life interacts with landscape processes to create the patterns that we see in rivers and wetlands around the world.

I also enjoy communicating knowledge to people. An academic career is mostly about making interesting discoveries, and then communicating the relevance of those discoveries to people in a way that can be understood and appreciated.

### WHAT TRAINING DID YOU UNDERGO, AND WHERE?

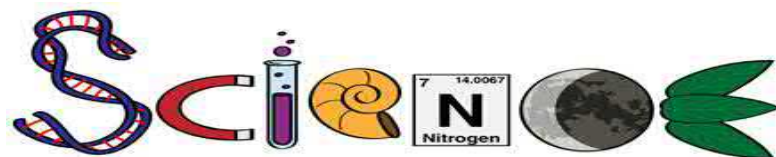
I completed BSc and BSc Honours degrees in Environmental Science at the University of Natal, and an MSc in Physical Geography at UKZN. I then moved to Exeter University in Devon, England, to complete a PhD in Physical Geography, which focused on the geomorphology of large rivers

### DESCRIBE AN AVERAGE DAY?

I try to start each day with a bit of writing or creative activity, like drafting graphics for a research paper, or preparing a lecture, or catching up on reading published research articles that are relevant to my research area. I typically need to respond to about 20-30 emails each day, but I try to do this after lunch, unless I am called to address an urgent administrative issue.



*Senior Lecturer, Environmental & Water Science*



### WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST?

I most enjoy teaching and research activities, especially those activities that take me out of the office and into the field. I try to spend as much time as possible digging around in rivers and wetlands, or riding around large rivers on small boats.

### 3 IMPORTANT QUALITIES THAT YOUR POSITION REQUIRES?

**Curiosity** is the most important quality that a scientist can have.

**Patience** is very important in teaching. Teaching and learning in higher education are not easy; things go wrong with equipment, students miss lectures for various reasons and then ask for help, and there will be times when you are required to teach some material that you are not truly passionate about, because no one else is available to do it. **Compassion** is very important. Many scientists are perfectionists, and sometimes expect too much of their colleagues, support staff, students, or themselves. We never really know what other people are going through, or why they may not be performing as well as we would like, but if we are patient, things usually work out okay in the end.

### IN 1 SENTENCE, DESCRIBE YOUR JOB?

The joy of discovery.

### EXPERIENCE VS TRAINING:

A university education is about much more than training. You need to be able to make critical decisions, and solve complex problems, when you do not have the step-by-step training manual in front of you (or when no training manual exists at all).

### ADVICE FOR GRADE 11 AND 12 LEARNERS CONSIDERING THIS CAREER?

The first essential step is to get a good matric pass and qualify for university admission. Once you are in the higher education system, you will slowly discover whether you want to continue studying or not.

### WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD TO OVERCOME?

Grappling with some difficult subjects and adjusting to the workload and way of thinking and communicating ideas at undergraduate level (university is a big leap up from school).

### WHAT QUALIFICATIONS DO I NEED?

A PhD is a minimum requirement to be appointed as a university lecturer – it takes about 10 years of study and

// **My job is to advance scientific understanding of river and wetland ecosystems, and to communicate the relevance and importance of this understanding to my peers** //

research (on average) through undergraduate, honours and masters degrees, to the end of the PhD.

### IS CONTINUING EDUCATION AND FURTHER STUDIES IMPORTANT IN YOUR TYPE OF CAREER?

Essential. It is the basis of this career.

### DOES THE INDUSTRY (AND YOUR TYPE OF POSITION) THAT YOU ARE IN, FACE GENDER BIAS?

There is a history of male-dominated gender bias in science, but this is changing as awareness increases. There are many opportunities around at the moment that focus on supporting women in science.

