

THE PEOPLE BEHIND FISHBASE AND SEALIFEBASE

# ARMI TORRES: FISHBASE'S FRESHWATER EXPERT

## WHEN ARMI TORRES

joined FishBase at age 25, she couldn't have predicted the turns her career as a marine biologist would take.

For years, the ocean had been the compass that guided her professional path so little did she know that she would end up diving into the depths of research on freshwater fish.

It all started when she decided to work with FishBase while completing her master's degree in marine biology. After spending some time encoding information on the taxonomy and biology of marine fishes, she was put in charge of all the information on fish reproduction and, later on, of the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Then, one day, Dr. Rainer Froese asked her to "migrate" from marine to freshwater and handle the compilation of freshwater information in FishBase.

"I did not see this change coming as my background is in marine science," Armi said. "I was a bit shocked but willingly accepted the new challenge."

After embracing the change and immersing herself in the new topic, Armi discovered two things: a new passion and the fact that there were huge knowledge gaps when it came to freshwater fishes.



"Based on our analysis using biological traits of threatened fishes in the 1996 IUCN Red List, Dr. Rainer Froese and I found trends which indicated that fishes that depend on freshwater at any stage of their life cycle are over 10 times more likely to be threatened than marine and brackish water fishes," she said. "These findings changed my perspective and my desire to seek higher education if I could work on threatened freshwater species to contribute in preventing the escalation of species extinction."

This newfound interest drove Armi back to the University of the Philippines, where she decided to pursue a PhD in environmental science. Upon graduation, she became a post-doctoral research fellow in charge of conducting global assessments of the conservation status of freshwater fishes native to the Philippines, in partnership between the IUCN and Quantitative Aquatics.

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### Challenging and fun times

Along the way, she has faced some challenges such as having to deliver, in a short amount of time, as much information as possible on freshwater fishes of Central and South America to various taxonomic authors for the production of the book Checklist of Freshwater Fishes of South and Central America (CLOFFSCA).

Keeping taxonomic names as current as possible is also a challenging, ongoing task that Armi – together with other members of the [FishBase and SeaLifeBase teams](#) – has to stay on top of.

“The task of splitting and lumping species information when names change is very challenging and requires patience and thoroughness. But I consider this as my favorite task,” she said.

Throughout her 30 years in FishBase, interesting assignments have been paired with stimulating activities such as workshops on fish identification and on how to use the tools in FishBase.

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An outing of the FishBase team in the 1990s.

There have also been opportunities to build connections and have fun with her coworkers. Armi particularly remembers a December holiday season, when the Kris Kringle game didn't go so well because Rainer kept leaving presents using his usual handwriting, which meant his identity as the “Secret Santa” of one of the team members was revealed at the onset of the game.

“We just burst out laughing,” she recalled.

Looking back and, at the same time, thinking about the future of FishBase and SeaLifeBase, Armi said that even though both projects have served their purpose of providing a wide array of information and tools crucial for the management and conservation of global aquatic ecosystems and species, the reality is that there is still a lot of information out there that is scattered and inaccessible to many.

“Thus, I look forward to the continuing service of FishBase and SeaLifeBase, two resources that are able to make relevant information on aquatic species accessible and understandable to everyone across the world,” she said.