

## Marine Hero

Elliott Norse, '69, knew what he wanted to be since he was five years old, although it was unlikely he could pronounce it at the time: an ichthyologist, which is to say he wanted to study fish. Growing up in Gerritsen Beach—"with an estuary for my backyard"—Norse says his true friends were always the sea creatures he observed endlessly.

After earning a degree in biology from Brooklyn College he attended graduate school at the University of Southern California. His plan was to teach at a university where he could also conduct research on marine life. But a tight academic job market made him put those plans on hold. He took a detour to Washington, D.C., for what was supposed to be a two-month internship at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Some eighteen months later he was hired as a staff ecologist for President Jimmy Carter's Council on Environmental Quality. He was charged with writing briefing papers for senior staff. He found it thrilling. "I was taking a broad-brush look at the health of the planet in a lot of my work there," he says.

Working inside the federal government, he realized how much corporate lobbying, misguided public policy, and American overconsumption were combining to threaten marine habitats. So he decided to become a conservationist, and that meant he really needed to study people.

"Marine ecosystems are not disappearing because of some failure of their own biology," Norse says. "It's us. It's people, families, governments."

In Washington, Norse worked on developing regulations for the offshore oil and gas industries and wrote a chapter in the Council on Environmental Quality's annual report to the president in which he argued that preserving ecological diversity should be the main priority of conservation efforts. It was a crucial insight into the nature of the problem, one that helped galvanize the environmental movement and still drives it today. He had found his groove.

All of a sudden, the liberal arts education—the Western civilization and sociology courses—that Norse received while at Brooklyn College was a valuable and essential tool in his work.

"Working in the policy world is where all the things I ever learned came together," he says. "I still flirted with the idea of academe, but I had Potomac fever. I got to do things on a level I could never have imagined."

He went on to a string of positions at environmental organizations. By 1996, he had met a lot of scientists who



were doing important research, but their efforts lacked the kind of coordination that could make a real impact. That's when he decided to found the Marine Conservation Biology Institute in Seattle, a think tank that brings together natural and social scientists to research and advocate on environmental issues.

"I felt the most important thing I could do would be to encourage the growth of a new science of marine conservation biology and to apply that science to the most pressing problems we face," he says. "By bringing together people who think about how oceans work and people who think about how humans work, we can better understand the nexus of those two and come up with solutions."

During his thirty-year career, he's had some impressive accomplishments. He worked behind the scenes to convince the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to establish four of the earliest national marine sanctuaries. He played a key role in encouraging President Clinton to launch the Marine Protected Areas Center, which serves as a focal point for developing a national system of protected areas. He also played a critical role in convincing the current administration to advance legislation to protect marine life in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

"There are actual pieces of real estate on this earth that I helped protect because I was at the right place at the right time with the right message," he says. "I am so lucky I didn't get what I asked for. I crossed the line from being somebody who thinks about things to somebody who applies that thinking to doing things, and it feels right for me."