From the Business World to the Natural World

HO YI WAN TOOK RISKS TO LIVE HIS PASSION

By Dana Kobilinsky



Courtesy Ho Yi Wan

▲ **Ho Yi Wan walks in the forest with his son. Changing his career was a tough choice, especially with a family to support, but Wan found the business world didn't give him the fulfillment he found as a wildlifer.**

Ho Yi Wan was finishing up some fieldwork in southern Utah, collecting ungulate scat for a project evaluating how forest regeneration after fire was affecting deer. Looking up from his work, he was frozen in shock when he saw a man in jeans and a cowboy hat pointing a pistol at him.

"Am I going to die?" thought Wan, a graduate student at the time. "I didn't say a word because I was too shocked."

Thankfully, his crewmembers were only seconds away, and when they showed up, they told the man they were just students. He retreated. But Wan couldn't help but wonder if he was targeted because he looked different. Born in Hong Kong, he was the only Asian on a team that was otherwise white.

It was a turning point in Wan's career. Was he in the wrong profession? Was it worth all of the work he did to get there? Was it a mistake to leave the business world for wildlife? He decided to stick it out—and help teach and support diversity and inclusion in the field.

"I hope that whoever might have a similar background like me has an easier path to success," said Wan, now an assistant professor in the department of wildlife at Humboldt State University and the president of the Arizona Chapter of The Wildlife Society. "Ultimately, I can't control a lot of things, but I can control what my lab is like."

Business in America

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Wan grew up surrounded by skyscrapers. There weren't many organized opportunities that he knew of to be outdoors. A career in wildlife never seemed like an option. "I always thought I was either going to work as a computer programmer or work as a finance investor," he said. "And that's what I ended up studying in college."

His studies brought him to the United States, where he enrolled at Brigham Young University-Idaho at the age of 17. It was a culture shock. "There were no tall buildings," he said. "I don't even know if there were elevators." He saw farms, mountains and forests for the first time. "It was my first exposure to wildlife and nature in general," he said.

But he continued on with his business studies. It seemed like the right move at the time. Growing up in a poor family, Wan said, "I thought my education was one of the ways to get us out of this cycle." After receiving his degree, he set off on a business career, first in Hong Kong and later Japan, where he moved with his wife and two sons. It was there that things started to change for him.

A turning point

"I started to feel like I was stuck or something," he said. "I felt like I was making a decent income for my family, but it didn't feel very fulfilled or meaningful."

He got accepted into a Master of Business Administration program, but that still didn't feel right. Then, just looking around him in the northernmost part of Japan, he had an epiphany.

"Japanese people are amazing, because even though they have the most advanced cities in the world, with a futuristic bullet train and all that, they also are able to preserve nature very well," he said. "It made me wonder—how did they do it?" He thought, "Maybe this is something I should learn more about."

Then one day, he was reading the news in Japan about air pollution coming in from China. He was skeptical at first, but he found out it was true. The pollution was impacting people and wildlife. He wanted to make a change. The first step was changing his career path.

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Taking chances

Wan returned to the United States, hoping to obtain a master's in environmental science. Getting into a program proved difficult, though. His business background wasn't helping in the realm of biology. He sent out over 150 emails seeking an opportunity but received only four replies, mostly negative.

"One professor wrote back a really long email reply, basically a list of all the deficiencies I had," he said. "At the end he told me to just give up. Don't pursue this path because you will fail."



Courtesy Ho Yi Wan

▲ **Ho Yi Wan poses with his lab students. Pictured are (from top left) José Rodríguez, Kellie Crouch, Logan Hysen, Ashley Harper, (from bottom left) Daniel Nayeri, Christopher Collier, Ho Yi Wan.**

But Wan persisted. The fourth response, from Samuel St. Clair at Brigham Young University in Utah, was a positive one.

"He had really good quantitative skills and he had a business degree and worked in the business world," said St. Clair, a professor of plant ecology at the university. "I value someone who has real-life experience working in the real world."

What really showed through was his passion about nature, St. Clair said. The professor took him on and served as his master's advisor and mentor as Wan set about studying the effects of fire on forest regeneration and how ungulate herbivory was impacted. The quantitative skills he learned in the business world started to pay off. After earning his master's in environmental science, Wan went on to earn a PhD in earth sciences and environmental sustainability at Northern Arizona University with an emphasis in climate and landscape change.

His parents, though, thought he was crazy. They hadn't heard about ecology as a career. "Then I got my PhD, and they were like, 'Oh, you're a doctor now!'" he joked.

Now, as an assistant professor in spatial ecology at Humboldt State University and an adjunct professor at NAU, he helps his students develop spatial and statistical models to understand things like the effects of climate change and human impact disturbances on habitats, connectivity and wildlife, with projects on four continents.

Inspiring—and including—others

Now in the wildlife field, Wan faced another obstacle—a lack of diversity in the profession. As a professor now, it's an obstacle he strives to help other students tackle. "I'm more open minded in terms of who should or shouldn't, can or can't pursue this path," he said.

One of the students in his lab is from Iran. The student's mentor there was thrown in jail. In Iran, conservation scientists can face political persecution. Wan brought the student to the U.S. so he could continue his studies at Wan's lab. Getting him a visa was a challenge, Wan said, but it paid off. The student has already published two peer-reviewed articles since joining Wan's lab. "Being able to uplift my students and seeing them flourish are the best parts of my job," he said.

That passion for increasing diversity is one he found he shared with fellow NAU professor Carol Chambers, TWS' immediate past president, who made increasing diversity one of her top goals for the organization.

"He's a top-notch scientist and already an amazing leader," she said. "I hope he continues to support TWS with his time and energy." ■



Dana Kobilinsky is the associate editor for The Wildlife Society.

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