



IDAHO INNOVATORS

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QUEST FOR SUSTAINABLE

AQUACULTURE

Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press
Ron Hardy, director of the University of Idaho Aquaculture Research Institute, examines a sample at the Hagerman Fish Culture Experiment Station on Nov. 27.

Ron Hardy built a fisheries research program respected around the world

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Ron Hardy has built a world-class fish research facility at the University of Idaho and is one of the top scholars in his field worldwide. His work has advanced the scientific knowledge of fish nutrition and genomics and sustainable aquaculture and has contributed substantially to fisheries management.

His dedication, commitment and tenacity no doubt have played a huge part in that success — but it might not have happened without fate's intervention.

"I wanted to be a doctor, or I thought I wanted to be a doctor," Hardy said, sitting in his office at the University of Idaho Hagerman Fish Culture Experiment Station.

He enrolled in a pre-med program at the University of Washington and worked at the Northern Pacific Railroad moving boxcars to pay his way through college.

After earning a bachelor's degree in zoology in 1969, he went to work at the university's medical school as a research technologist for doctors working with patients with kidney diseases. He worked there for two years but decided medicine was not for him.

He instead wanted to go into agriculture like his father, who had moved the family from Canada to Washington when Hardy was a baby to manage Washington State University's poultry farm.

Zoology was a little too academic for his taste, however, and he wanted to pursue practical research.

Ron Hardy

Occupation: Director, University of Idaho Aquaculture Research Institute since 2002

Career: 1996 to present — University of Idaho, professor, animal and veterinary sciences; director of Hagerman Fish Culture Experiment Station (until 2016). 1984-1996 — Supervisory research chemist, Northwest Fisheries Science Center, NOAA Fisheries, Seattle. 1984-1996 — Research assistant, associate and full professor, University of Washington School of Fisheries, Seattle

Education: Ph.D. in fisheries, University of Washington, 1979; master's degree in nutrition, Washington State University, 1973; bachelor's degree in zoology, University of Washington, 1969

Author or co-author: More than 300 scientific papers on fish nutrition

The annual Capital Press salute to Idaho's Western Innovators

That took him to Washington State University to work on an interdisciplinary degree from the departments of animal sciences, biochemistry and food and human nutrition.

The book

And it was there, on a routine trip to the library, he happened upon a book that would change his life.

That book — "Fish Nutrition" by John Halver — had never even been checked out, but it was groundbreaking, he said.

The state of knowledge about fish nutrition at the time was "zip" and 30 years behind the progress that had been made on nutrition for other animals, he said.

The concept was "something new" and the book was a "gold mine," he said.

Halver's book was pretty advanced for fish nutrition, but research on nutritional needs and requirements was just getting

started in that arena.

Halver was a biochemist working for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and approached fish nutrition from a biochemical and physiological standpoint. He was the first person to put fish nutrition in line with pigs, chickens and humans, Hardy said.

"So that appealed to me a lot. He was a visionary," he said.

Halver's knowledge would make it possible to develop fish feed in pellet form to efficiently raise fish on farms.

"I saw that right off the bat when I read his book," he said.

After earning a master's degree in nutrition in 1973, Hardy went back to the University of Washington to study fish nutrition in a doctoral program. In the middle of his studies, Halver took a position as a professor at the university and was a member of Hardy's supervisory committee. He was Hardy's main

adviser on his Ph.D. research project on fish nutrition, and Hardy was his teaching assistant.

Their association would last decades and result in their publishing a third edition of Halver's book together.

In the field

After earning a Ph.D. in fisheries in 1978, Hardy joined the university's fisheries research faculty, taught some classes — including Halver's introductory class for undergraduates — and procured grants and contracts.

A federal fisheries laboratory — with nice equipment — was nearby, and he started going there to use that equipment. Eventually, he was invited to work there at the Northwest Fisheries Science Center in a two-year intergovernmental exchange program. Upon completion, he was offered a permanent position at the laboratory.

He was advised to take a leave from the university without pay so he could return and take over Halver's position when he retired, which was expected in the not-so-distant future.

"There was just one flaw — Halver didn't retire," he said.

Hardy remained at the Northwest Fisheries Science Center for 12 years and was being groomed for an executive position when he got a call from an associate at the University of Idaho who wanted him to apply for a position with the university.

He wasn't interested, but at the associate's insistence reluctantly visited the university, where a

meeting had been arranged — unbeknownst to Hardy — with the university president.

What was presented was a brief synopsis of what universities in the West were doing in aquaculture and what the University of Idaho was aspiring to do.

"I was blown away. I was amazed," he said.

Later, the university flew him in to meet with legislators and industry people and to see a federal laboratory in Hagerman that had been mothballed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

"The university had leased it and wanted me to create something out of it," he said.

It was a small cinder-block facility that didn't even meet fire codes, but Hardy would have money to get started and the university's blessing to do whatever he wanted.

"How can you resist that? So I took the job," he said.

He was set at his job in Washington, was offered the directorship of the fisheries center if he stayed, and no one could believe he walked away, he said.

"But I decided it was time for a change. I jumped at it. Six months later, I thought I made the biggest mistake of my life," he said.

Creating something out of nothing — something new that's not bumping up against entrenched, successful laboratories — and making it work is not easy, he said.

"That's when I decided to put the emphasis on genomics," he said.

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