



Stuart Carlton is the new IISG director

THIS PAST SUMMER, IISG's director Tomas Höök moved on to take on a new role leading Purdue University's Department of Forestry and Natural Resources and at the same time, Assistant Director Stuart Carlton stepped into the IISG director shoes. Both sat down for interviews to reflect on the past and share their thoughts looking toward the future. Here are Carlton's comments.

These interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

What makes Sea Grant special?

We're an unusual program, in that we fund research and also do outreach

and education work on coastal environmental issues. A number of organizations do outreach or work in environmental education or fund research. We serve all those missions at the same time.

The work we do is practical and solution-oriented and it is driven by our stakeholders. We're helping to solve problems for people through research, outreach, and education, and as a result, we have these amazing, real-world results. You can see us making a difference in the lives of all sorts of people—from small aquaculture farmers to Chicago public schools, to people in Great Lakes Area of Concern communities, to businesses, charter captains, fishers,

the National Weather Service, and beach goers. Who else gets to work across all these groups? That's why I think Sea Grant is so cool.

What would you say are Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant strengths?

The strongest IISG programs are the ones that are locally relevant and address the primary issues in Illinois and Indiana, focusing on southern Lake Michigan. We were among the original groups doing outreach related to aquatic invasive species. We developed our program essentially from nothing to one of the most important AIS-related outreach programs there is.

Another strength is the way that we leverage partnerships—sometimes by seeding staff there, sometimes by just working with them closely—and it allows us to integrate into the local community and be super effective.

Our long-standing partnership with the EPA Great Lakes National Program Office has allowed us to work on Great Lakes Areas of Concern and also to be part of a team bringing scientists together to coordinate data collection across all five Great Lakes. It's enabled us to help develop and administer the Center for Great Lakes Literacy. We worked with EPA on contaminants of emerging concern, including microplastics and unwanted medicines, which also led to innovative partnerships with local police departments to set up community collection programs.

Our long-standing partnership with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning has led to our work in water supply planning where the numbers rapidly get incomprehensibly large if you're talking about gallons of water saved. But what's not incomprehensible is that some people who might've had their water shut off have not, because of the work we've done with our partners on the issue of affordability.

I could say more in the same vein about our work in coastal resilience, green infrastructure, aquaculture, community planning, to name a few.

As our new director, what do you bring to the program?

One thing I bring to the program is a broad base of experience that is directly Sea Grant relevant. As a former marine fisheries biologist and current natural resources social scientist, I've worked in research a ton. I've worked as a Sea Grant outreach specialist for Texas Sea Grant and in the communication program at Florida Sea Grant.

I also spent a couple of years being—and there is no modesty here—the world's worst 7th and 8th grade science teacher. While I wasn't good at it, it's made me: A, a better parent, B, a better person, and C, really helped me to understand what teachers and the education system are like. So many things that I've done, whether with Sea Grant or not, were the types of things that Sea Grant does.

Having been assistant director for seven years really helped me understand that this is a fairly complex program, especially because of all those partnerships. My role has given me time to understand how the program is put together and the different work that people do, and to understand it from the inside out; and it's helped me to get to know the people, who are second to none, as far as I'm concerned.

Over the last seven years, IISG has changed a lot. We moved the administrative home to Purdue, and we changed leadership. I've been there since day one of the move, helping to build up what the administrative structure looks like. And I got to work with the former director, Thomas Höök, who's someone who I admire tremendously.

What are your plans for the program going forward?

In terms of immediate changes, my answer is absolutely nothing. Everything as far as I'm concerned is going gangbusters since I've been here, and so I'd be dumb to make big changes, and I'd like to think I'm not dumb. What is going to change, though, is the world around us, both environmentally and the context in which we operate. I think we're going to continue to expand our partner base, maybe even beyond traditional places looking towards industry and foundations to see how Sea Grant can help them.

I think over the next several years, there'll be an evolution in how we

harness data. We've been funding research for 40 years and we've had buoys in the water for many years—we're generating a ton of data. Increasingly, as we enter an era with more automated analytical work being done, thinking about what we do with data is going to be more important. Let's make sure that we have access to it when appropriate and then, what can we do with it? How can we inspire? How can we make it available to answer complicated questions on issues that are important to us?

What are you most excited about going forward as director?

I'm most excited about the chance to continue to work with all of these great people, right? Sea Grant works best, to me, when it's not a hierarchical, top-down organization. To me, our best ideas don't come from this office, or that office, the best stuff comes from the people who are out there. And so the chance to continue to create an environment where people feel like they can thrive is something that I'm excited about doing. Expanding our definition of what Sea Grant work is, I think is also legitimately exciting. ✓