

Turning passion into purpose

Ms Letchumi Mani juggled work and postgraduate studies to share her passion for science

BY RACHAEL GOH

How does Nickelodeon cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants differ from a real-life sea sponge?

Drawing parallels between examples from popular culture and their counterparts in the natural world is one way to help the public better understand science, says Ms Letchumi Mani, 29, assistant manager at Nexus, the central agency for National Education and Total Defence at the Ministry of Defence.

After working in the Outreach and Education Unit of Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum for the first two years of her career, the life sciences graduate applied for the National University of Singapore (NUS)-Australian National University (ANU) Joint Master of Science in Science Communication degree programme.

“I hoped that the programme would allow me to hone my communication skills and convey the passion that all environmen-

tal biologists feel about science,” she says.

Effective communication

Over the course of two years, Ms Letchumi underwent a diverse curriculum that focused on seminar-style teaching, web lectures and interactive pedagogy. This taught her a great deal about the effective use of language in science communication.

A key lesson she learnt was the use of analogies in scientific explanation.

“Many of us use analogies to improve a recipient’s understanding of an unfamiliar topic. Yet, misunderstandings can arise if we do not highlight differences between the subject and the analogy.”

Take, for example, the analogy of SpongeBob SquarePants for sea sponges. Similar to a sea sponge, the pants-wearing sponge breathes underwater and filter feeds. Unlike SpongeBob, however, sea sponges tend to be round and remain mostly immobile.

Pursuing a postgraduate course part-time to boost her skills as a science communicator was a fruitful experience. To those considering a postgraduate programme, Ms Letchumi’s advice is to think about what you want to pursue and why, seek advice from peers and lecturers and believe in yourself.

“Regardless of my career stage or field, I want to continue learning skills and techniques that will make me better at what I am doing and improve the way I am doing it.”



PHOTO: LETCHUMI MANI

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National University of Singapore, Faculty of Science, and Australian National University, College of Science

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