

Riding the Waves

How Alex Mangold is staying focused on an unusual passion during a historic interruption

STILLWATER, Okla. — Alex Mangold has gotten this far in life with two very important qualities: adaptability and loving the ocean.

Mangold's enthusiasm for all things marine started when she was 12, when her dad took her to get scuba dive certified. After earning her PADI Open Water Diver certification, Mangold fell in love with the ocean and the animals that live there.

“I watched literally any documentary that I could about marine conservation,” Mangold said, explaining that for a while, she was sure she would become a marine biologist. She quickly realized she had two problems, though. First, she didn't love science quite as much as she loved marine animals. Second, she lived in Oklahoma.

To solve both problems, Mangold adapted her love of marine life into something more versatile. She decided to go to Oklahoma State University, where she majored in strategic communications. “It's fun because you can do communications for literally anything,” Mangold explained. She hoped that with a communications degree, she would still be able to work around marine life in some capacity.

Mangold thrived during her time at OSU. She was heavily involved in the School of Media and Strategic Communications, serving as the PRSSA president and an SMSC ambassador. She also competed in both the Bateman and NSAC competitions. “I like to be busy,” she said, laughing.

Mangold’s hard work paid off. When she graduated in May of 2020, she had two internships waiting for her in Florida. One was with the Manatee County government, which she accepted for the pay. The other was at Mote Marine Laboratory & Aquarium, which she accepted for the opportunity to work with marine animals. Her hard work in communications and love of marine life had finally come together.

“My number one choice internship was Mote Marine Lab, and that’s the one that I got,” Mangold said. “I have a crazy passion for marine conservation and stuff, which is kind of random because I literally grew up in Oklahoma. But that’s kind of why I applied to Mote, and I’m really glad that I got it because it was an awesome opportunity.”

Mangold spent the summer filming marine mammal releases and writing about the lab’s conservation efforts. Her plan to adapt her degree to incorporate her passion for marine life had worked out beautifully.

She had also avoided the worst effects of the struggling job market.

“There was some talk about whether or not they were going to have interns,” Mangold said of her internships. She had graduated just two months after COVID-19 arrived in the United States,

and the patchwork of lockdowns and business closures across the country had forced millions of workers onto unemployment and driven many of Mangold's classmates into grad school unexpectedly. Ultimately, both of her internships decided they would still bring her on for the summer.

In the fall, though, the pandemic that had shaken so many lives and taken so many jobs caught up to Mangold.

“After the summer, I moved to Tallahassee — in August, I think — and could not find a job at all,” Mangold said. Her plan had been to work full-time while attending grad school part-time at Florida State University, but the pandemic and the deep recession meant that was easier said than done.

“I literally applied to everything,” Mangold continued. I was applying to full-time, part-time, anything communications-related, and there was just no one hiring.”

Although she wasn't being picky with the jobs she applied for, Mangold said opportunities for entry-level workers were few and far between. With economic problems mounting, most companies were only hiring for experienced positions.

“It's frustrating, definitely, because I just spent four years and thousands and thousands of dollars to go to school,” Mangold reflected.

“Eventually it’ll all work out. It’s just frustrating.”

Instead of letting the frustration completely derail her plans, Mangold found a way to adapt to the situation. She started her master’s degree in public interest and media communication as planned, and to compensate for the lackluster job market in Tallahassee, she enrolled full-time with a graduate assistantship. Her program largely focused on advocacy. Several of Mangold’s professors specialized in environmental communications, and she hoped they could help her launch a career in environmental advocacy. That way, she could build a career around caring for the marine animals she’d fallen in love with as a child.

Despite her best efforts, though, Mangold’s graduate school experience wasn’t what she had hoped for.

“I started grad school at FSU in August, and that was a lot different than I thought,” Mangold said. “The whole reason I wanted to go to grad school was to expand my network and meet new people and gain different perspectives and stuff like that. And since everything was all online, I didn’t really get any of that.”

The pandemic had caused more problems than just a struggling job market. Though Mangold had escaped most of its adverse effects after graduation, they were making more and more appearances in her life in late summer and throughout the fall.

“There was honestly no one there. None of the students were there, none of the professors were there — they were all staying somewhere else because the campus was closed.”

Not wanting to spend any more time and money on a watered-down grad school experience, Mangold adapted again. She and her fiancé, who had moved to Florida with her, made the difficult decision to leave FSU and come back to Oklahoma.

“It was definitely a hard decision,” Mangold recalled. “It was a good decision, but we had just moved to Tallahassee a few months before that, and we were planning on staying in Tallahassee for at least two years, you know, while I finished school. So it was definitely a hard decision to come back, but there was just no opportunity in Tallahassee.”

Since being back in Oklahoma, Mangold has been waiting out the pandemic at her dad’s startup company. Although she’s not in a formal communications job, she said she has been able to introduce her communications skills into the business by creating a website and a logo. Still, she’s determined to make the arrangement temporary. Like she always has, Alex is already looking toward her next goal. She plans to work with her dad until the pandemic ends and schools reopen, but after that, she’s eager to finish her master’s degree.

“I love school,” Mangold explained. “I literally loved college, I loved high school, everything, so I just didn’t really want it to be over. I love learning new things, and I just love the academic space and conversations you can have with professors and other students who are like-minded and open-minded.”

Past finishing her master's program, Mangold is keeping her options open.

“For a long time, I wanted to get my Ph.D.,” she said, reflecting on her love for being in an academic environment. As much as she loves working with marine animals, she also admitted she's open to the idea of being a professor. “You never know, I still might.”

For now, though, Alex Mangold is focused on waiting out the pandemic. When it ends, she'll be ready to adapt to whatever comes next.