
My NASA Data - STEM Career Connections

Meet Lola Fatoyinbo, Research Scientist



Job Title

research scientist

Bio

Where do you work and do you remember what it was like on your first day of work?

I work at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, and I have been here for almost 3 years. On my first day, I was nervous and hoped that I would be up to the tasks that I would have to do. I remember sitting in a meeting and being impressed by how smart and knowledgeable the people around me were.

How did you discover your passion for Earth Science?

I lived in Benin and Ivory Coast in West Africa as a teenager where deforestation and pollution are rampant and mostly uncontrolled. I always found it heartbreaking to watch such beautiful places being destroyed. I was also very aware that this also directly affected all of us living there, but the largest effect was on the poor population who were drinking polluted water for instance.

My parents also fueled my passion for exploration. They were avid travelers and even drove from Nigeria to Germany in a Volkswagen bus! We often did road trips through various West African Countries, and they would tell me how important it was to preserve our environment. Seeing so many different places also made me appreciate them.

What do you enjoy most about what you do?

I love traveling to new places, whether in person or by looking at an image taken by a satellite. I can spend hours 'exploring' on Google Earth! But I think what I enjoy the most about my job is coming up with new research projects for myself or for our student interns. There are so many questions to be answered and projects to develop and that's what really gets me excited.

What are some of the most important lessons you have learned in your life?

Don't always choose the easiest path. I always loved science, yet I did much better in languages and social studies in school. But I wanted to become a scientist and worked really hard to make it happen.

What was the most difficult moment of your career? What did you learn?

The most difficult moment for me was when I was doing fieldwork in a very remote tropical forest in Madagascar. Here I was, doing what I had always dreamed of- exploring the rainforest, and it was nowhere near as glamorous as I had always thought of it. We were working long days, hiking 10 km every day. It was cold, rainy, there were leeches inching up my pants, I kept falling on the trails, I was hungry and exhausted and missed my friends and family. I felt really bad for myself, then I remembered that I had wanted to have this opportunity since I was a little kid! In the end, it was one of the greatest experiences of my life and I learned that you shouldn't give up just because what you're working on isn't the way you imagined it would be.

Who has been the biggest influence on your life, and what lessons did they teach you?

The biggest influence in my childhood and early adulthood was my parents. They always encouraged me to be a lifelong learner and not feel like I should have to fit into a particular box. My dad taught me to make a career out of your hobby and my mother was and still is my biggest cheerleader. She is always encouraging and does everything to help me get my work done. She's even come on work trips with me to babysit my kids!

Throughout college and my professional life, my husband has been my greatest influence. He is the hardest working person I know so I have to keep up with him!

Did you have to overcome any gender barriers in your career?

As an African American woman, one is bound to encounter some sort of barrier or hurdle in a career. I chose not to pay them too much attention and just work as hard as I could and look forward. That being said, I know that the only reason I can do this is that many before me had to fight very hard for equality in the workplace. Nobody ever asked me to bring them coffee just because I was a woman, and I am very grateful to those who fought before me.

What one piece of advice would you like to pass on to the next generation?

Hard work is worth more than talent! Like I said, I was always much better at languages than science. But I wanted to have a career as a scientist so I stuck to it! But you don't have to settle and in ways can "have it all". I am proof as I now I speak 5 languages!