

THE MICROBIAL MENAGERIE

Exploring the microbial world around us

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MARCH 22, 2017 BY [JENNIFER TSANG](#)

MEET A MICROBIOLOGIST: NAOMI BOXALL

Naomi Boxall is not afraid to point out that the pictures of people in white lab coats with colorful vials of liquids do not show how real science is done. She's had to take one of those pictures herself. Her time in science has led her to sample soil and water in the Western Australian Wheatbelt, participate in committees and workshops for postdocs and early career scientists, as well as organize morning teas and social events for her department.

A "typical day" does not exist for Naomi. She could be working in the lab one day to writing and supervising students the next day or even building bioreactors another day. She participates in [science cafes](#) and volunteers with an all girls science club. The only constant from day to day however, is coffee, food and a lunchtime walk. Naomi states, "what is good is that no day is the same as the one before and I enjoy that everything is varied and challenging."

Name: Dr. Naomi Boxall

Job title: Postdoctoral fellow

Institution: CSIRO Land and Water; Perth, Australia

Website: <http://people.csiro.au/B/N/Naomi-Boxall>

Twitter: [@dr_nome](#)

Naomi first set out to become a medical doctor, intrigued by human biology. During her studies at the University of Western Australia, she became drawn to biochemistry and microbiology. In her third year, she took a course in environmental microbiology. Despite her

enthusiasm for the human body, she found out she was more interested in how microorganisms influenced the environment and “all of the amazing industrial processes that microbes are involved in.” She then came across an ad on a bulletin board looking for someone to study the interaction between microbes and minerals in mining environments for the summer. She got the job and her experience that summer led her to pursue environmental microbiology as a graduate student, a research scientist, and an environmental consultant. She has even identified a [new genus of bacteria!](#)



First time playing catcher at softball for the Carine Cats. Image credit: Emily Phillips.



Obtaining salty and acidic soil and water samples from the Western Australian Wheatbelt for microbial

enrichments. Image credit: Michael Siebert.

Now, Naomi is a postdoctoral fellow at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), a federal agency for scientific research in Australia. Her project focuses on developing microbial tools to recover metals from electronic waste. In Australia, 97% of batteries end up in landfills and those that are recycled are brought overseas for processing. Not an ideal situation! Finding ways to reuse these materials is crucial as the world continues to develop. Traditional methods of metal recovery can involve chemicals that are harsh to the environment. Naomi is trying to use microbes to extract metals in a way that is more economical and environmentally friendly than the traditional methods.

Naomi characterizes herself as “a crazy old cat lady in a young person’s body.” She complements her love of cats and yarn with sports. She plays softball and golf, runs, weight lifts, and occasionally gets hangry. “If you meet me, give me a sandwich before saying hello and I will be your best bud,” she says.

Naomi’s microbial doppelgänger: *Brevibacterium linens*
Brevibacterium linens is a soil bacterium but is also found on the skin and cheese. It is one of the major contributors to foot odor, but that is not why Naomi chose this bacterium! When asked about her microbial persona, Naomi says, “it’s a key microbe in washed-rind cheese and who doesn’t love a good stinky cheese? I guess you could say that I am a bit cheesy.”



One of Naomi’s cats, Ninja. Image credit: Naomi Boxall.

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