

LEDA A. CUNNINGHAM

2005 Dolores E. Fisher Award

Personal Essay

Beneath the Sea: Protecting Earth's Last True Wilderness from Below

I love the water. My mom used to have to drag me out of the lake at the end of summer days spent building rock piles and playing *The Little Mermaid* with my sister. Only when I was old enough to figure out how to sneak back down to the lake at night did it occur to me I needed the water much like other kids needed softball or video games.

My application for this award last year highlighted various tangible life-long accomplishments in marine conservation: logging over 200 dives on six continents and in every ocean, creating an education center for Zanzibari school children to learn about fisheries conservation in East Africa; working with Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) to train volunteer divers in conducting visual fish surveys. This year I'd like to frame my passion for the ocean in a different context: living in a city without an ocean. While I have long bemoaned my decision to do graduate school in a non-coastal area, I'm coming to realize that this is how most of the country views the ocean: as the source of great seafood or as some place 'over there.'

We face a major challenge in getting people to care about ocean issues. Unlike endangered wildlife in zoos or asthma-inducing air pollution, protecting marine resources is a unique environmental problem in that most people don't feel a connection to ocean ecosystems. Even coastal residents may only experience the ocean's surface, through fishing, boating, or wind surfing. Though a vast majority of Americans enjoy seafood regularly, how many know exactly what they're eating, where it came from, or how it was harvested? How many care? I've often heard the argument that inland dwellers don't have a stake in marine issues, especially in the Great Lakes region where freshwater concerns far outweigh marine problems in both public support and public funding. But with an estimated \$60 billion in combined annual revenues from the U.S. dive, travel, watersports, and commercial and recreational fishing industries, what happens to our nation's oceans is of no small consequence to all Americans.

There are several major players in marine conservation in this country. Government manages our oceans as a public trust through legislation, regulation, and enforcement. Private industry can choose to have a positive or negative effect on ocean health through its resource use and waste management policies and practices. Scientists conduct research to increase our collective knowledge base about the marine environment. Educators disseminate this information. Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) serve as implementers, advocates, organizers, facilitators, and field workers on specific marine conservation projects. The good news is that there are many hands on deck to address marine problems. The challenge - and the solution - is getting the players to work together.

I was hit with an inspiration while at a dive show in Chicago last month. What if everybody learned to dive? Seriously: what if anyone who wanted to could explore the ocean from below? Would that help to keep reefs cleaner or fish healthier? I bet it would. I have therefore made it my life's goal to complete Dive Instructor Training and personally certify as many people in scuba as possible. Since you have to start somewhere, Congress is the first logical group. In my role as Dive Outreach Coordinator for the Conserve Our Ocean Legacy campaign at the National Environmental Trust (NET), I recently facilitated the formation of the Capitol Hill Dive Club as an officially-sanctioned Congressional Staff Organization. Our kick-off activity is an open-water certification course that culminates with check-out dives on Earth Day, April 22. As of this writing, nine Hill staff from Maine to Washington (and Wisconsin and Nevada) will learn to dive from none other than Senator Hilary Clinton's Scheduler, who is also a dive instructor in his free time. In building relationships through diving, I am able to share my love of the ocean and my concern for its health with policy-makers who can make a difference.

Thus the city-bound graduate student has as much stake in, and influence on, ocean health as the fisherman who watches his catch size decrease every year. It's not about where your home is or where you hang your wetsuit: it's about where your heart is, and understanding the impact that healthy oceans have on all our lives. It is up to us, the tree-hugging, water-loving, depth-defying 'true blues' to impart our passion for the ocean to others. Our future lies in our ability to inspire and engage people in protecting our planet's last true wilderness.