

Andrea Rivera

“Ocean Dreaming”

Immersed in abundant earth beauty, as a young girl my natural life was centered among misty mountains, rain clouds and sprouting seedlings. I dreamt of unveiling and experiencing the beautiful hydrating feeling of the ocean. Ironically, vivid images from National Geographic magazines developed an interest for the marine world. I grew up in a lush green tropical rain forest in a rural town of Honduras, Central America. The outdoors were my playground, and I would spend time exploring through a small river where I would catch small crabs to bring to my mother. Even then, I constantly visualized clear turquoise waters full of multicolored fish, coral gardens and algae. The ocean was nothing but a dream, I was land locked, I did not know how to swim and the defensive crab in me was burrowed in the sand. However, captivated with oceanic feelings, the tides were not in to expose me.

At the age of thirteen my family moved to New Jersey for a better life and economic opportunities. The industrial and consumer differences were shocking, but I quickly adapted to the change of pace and assimilated into a new life. I was intrigued to expand my marine science education in High School, an opportunity that wouldn't have been possible in my country. I also advanced a second language and became an athlete in Field Hockey and a varsity captain in Lacrosse. My family's financial challenges made me discover strengths about myself that I never really anticipated at such a young age. During this time, I also started working at an aquarium, and a pet shop gaining all the knowledge I could of aquatic species. The Marine Science and Environmental course in High School did it for me and motivated me to pursue my dreams. The Jersey shore exposed me to a different perspective of ocean I knew of, but I gained a lot from the opportunities that I became involved with.

I am the first generation and woman to become a Marine Ecologist in my family, and I felt privileged to attend the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) my freshman year. I became immersed in ocean's powerful, mysterious and beautiful self in the Caribbean island of Saint Thomas, Virgin Islands. The water became my life, and from then on I knew I had discovered my passion. The ocean nurtures, challenges my intellect and gives me courage to keep on following my dreams. I quickly joined the open water scientific course at UVI and instantly became euphoric to experience the marine ecosystem, I always dreamt of studying. Later that year, I decided to dedicate my life to increasing the global perspective of human coastal interactions, targeting pollution problems. This resulted in my transfer to the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM).

Humans are heavily impacting marine ecosystems, directly through nutrient loading, toxic contamination, over fishing, and global warming. We have repeatedly altered aquatic environments with waste disposal from aquaculture, sewage and heavy recreational uses. Consequently, I am interested in studying potential solutions to these problems through sustainable and bioremediation practices as well as conservation and preservation of marine protected areas. Therefore, as global population continues to increase, the need to educate youths and adults on ways to protect the oceans is becoming critical. I believe that through my current and future actions, I hope to involve citizens and policy makers to make better decisions. Leaving a legacy and regulations for others to follow.

My main interests are related to tropical marine systems, particularly those of mangrove and coral reef ecosystems in Honduras. The Mesoamerican Reef is the 2nd largest reef system after the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. Little is known about the extensive reefs found in Central America, and foreign scientists have been notorious

for arriving to collect data and leaving without benefiting the locals or the marine environment. The reefs of the Bay Islands have a high diversity of coral species, but there are under many pressures from tourism, sedimentation and over fishing. Ultimately, my goal is to work in a marine and environmental organization to help incorporate ecological research projects, involve communities, increase education and incentives for Eco Tourism. I want to figure out ways in which resource conservation and community development that could be balanced in a sustainable way, creating a symbiotic relationship.

Life has a funny way of working out, now I dream of going back to my country to protect the coral reefs I visualized as a young girl. It feels like the white wash finally has exposed me to where I truly love being, in the ocean. The spectacular marine environment needs to be protected! As an emergent young woman scientist, I believe that it is our responsibility not only is to do pure science, but also to apply it in ways that can benefit our society. My knowledge, passion, motivation and perseverance will guide me through a flowing ocean of possibilities. My life is devoted to preserve the amazing biodiversity coral reefs have to offer, and I will do what it takes to preserve its profound beauty.

Andrea Rivera