

Each month, ARK & TENT will profile an individual we feel is deserving of recognition. We hope you find their work inspirational and that it might lead you to become involved on a deeper, more personal level.

BARBARA WHITMAN

Changing the Way We View the Seas that Surround Us

By Josephine Matyas

An African proverb says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” On an island in the Caribbean, this age-old wisdom has been adapted by a dedicated marine biologist named Barbara Whitman at her Under the Sea facility, where she encourages an appreciation for (and understanding of) the creatures who live in the waters that surround Nevis.

Whitman’s arrival on the island was quite serendipitous: a decade ago a Caribbean breeze changed direction and altered the course of a tall ship she was cruising aboard, forcing an unscheduled stop on Nevis.

“I wanted to travel and stay close to the ocean, so I needed to find a way to get people to pay me to do it,” she chuckles. “I’d been teaching marine biology in the northeastern states, offering hands-on programs for school children. For years, I also chartered tall ships and ran small eco-adventures moving from island to island, studying the marine environment, volcanoes, rainforests and native cultures.” But when the wind shifted and took her ship off its intended course, Whitman took a look around Nevis . . . and six months later left the eco-sailing business, moved down from her home in Connecticut, and hung out her shingle for business.

Interestingly, most Nevisians do not swim and are afraid of what lives in the sea that surrounds their little piece of paradise. So Whitman also operates her center as a place where local children can learn about marine life and eventually become the protectors of their environment. Her long-term goal is for Nevisians to see the ocean as a place that must be handled carefully if it is to continue to provide them with their livelihood, food and beauty.

Whitman’s affection for the children of the island resulted in the creation of an after-school program called Sea Squirts. The group of ten kids meets once during the week to learn about a topic of the marine environment – everything from sea urchins to the development of a coral reef. Then, on the weekend, they head off on a field trip that can involve anything from using a biologist’s field equipment, to a very hands-on encounter with whichever topic they are studying.



There’s also time spent in local classrooms. Whitman has written curriculum on marine environments for the local schools, operated hands-on courses for local students, designed a coral reef monitoring program, and worked to promote public awareness of the marine environmental issues and challenges the world’s oceans are facing. Every kindergarten child on the island has already been to visit the aquarium, and material and instructions have been given to the teachers to provide follow-up in their classrooms.

Even with the successful implementation of her classroom-based programs, the centerpiece of Whitman’s marine biology facility is what she calls “Touch and Go Snorkel Tours,” which aim to give visitors an enhanced view of the underwater world. The three-hour program starts with a quick look at Caribbean sea creatures using a wall-sized mural and some dried specimens; after that, it’s everyone’s favorite dry-land part: the three “touch” tanks.

The salt water tanks are filled with marine creatures you can handle, as well as others that are best left alone. Whitman wants every visitor’s snorkeling experience to be enriched before they even enter the water, so she talks about the strange behavior of each animal, giving tips on how to spot sea cucumbers, anemones, urchins and all types of colorful Caribbean fish. As a live conch slides along her outstretched hand,





Whitman instructs, “When you hold a sea animal, your hands must be wet. And don’t ever rub them – they have an oily covering that protects them against infection.”

With understanding comes compassion, so the next part of the Touch and Go program is a guided adventure to some of the best snorkeling spots in the area. As Whitman notes, “This part of the world is a nursery for sea creatures. The waters around Nevis are still fairly pristine so we need to encourage the people who live and visit here to preserve it. We need to

prevent damage rather than clean it up.”

Every dip into the waters around Nevis (and its sister island of St. Kitts) becomes an enhanced and fun experience owing to Whitman’s great sense of humor. “Helping people feel comfortable in the water is my specialty,” says Whitman, who’s able to point out sea creatures that most of us would miss even if we were staring right at them.

One that holds a special place in Whitman’s heart is the sea turtle, and she’s incorporated rehabilitative services into another program visitors have participated in. Allowing a group of participants to hitch Crush, a young hawksbill turtle, onto a retractable leash and head into the water with him for a swim, provided a valuable teaching tool for both the swimmers, and the young hatchling.

The fifth orphaned sea turtle that she has successfully raised and reintroduced to the ocean, Crush - who at one time was feared to be blind - was rescued from near-death when Whitman discovered it trapped in a nest and unable to scramble to open sea. “The whole point of the guided swims were to teach Crush how to survive in the open ocean,” Whitman explains. “He needed to build up strength and endurance, learn what to eat and how to interact with other sea creatures.”

In the end, it was the turtle that decided when it was time to venture out on his own. One day, preparing for a swim, Crush wriggled out of his harness and took to the open sea.



“I knew he was ready,” says Whitman. “I saw him seven months later while I was snorkeling out at Major’s Bay point. I can recognize him because of his deformed shell and the inverted golden ‘Y’ on the top of his head. He sat on the bottom and looked up at me for a long time. When all my snorkelers came closer he started to slowly swim away. That’s what I wanted. I didn’t want him to get too cozy with people. I was so happy to know he was fine. There were three other small hawksbills in the area so he’s not alone, either.”

It may indeed take a village to raise a child, but it was the dedication of a woman named Barbara Whitman who successfully reintroduced a sea turtle named Crush to his watery home.

FAST FACTS

Tourist Information for Nevis Island

(866) 556-3847

www.nevisisland.com

Under The Sea Sealife Education Centre

(869) 469-1291

www.undertheseanevis.com

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