

NEW WAVE Kids Organize to Save Our Oceans

by April Thompson



Earth's oceans shelter more than a million species, employ millions of people and feed billions more. Their complex ecosystems increasingly face critical challenges, including acidification, overfishing and pollution. Inspiring us all, youths nationwide are stepping up with bold, creative actions benefiting present and future generations to show us how we too, can do our part.

Sean Russell, 24, of Englewood, Florida, was exposed to ocean wonders in junior marine conservation summer camps and 4-H programs. Volunteering with Mote Marine Laboratory's dolphin research program, in Sarasota, Russell was struck by how improperly discarded fishing line entangled and killed dolphins and other wildlife. At 16, he launched the Stow It—Don't Throw It Project to promote portable receptacles made from repurposed tennis ball containers for anglers to stash used fishing line for later safe disposal on shore. More than 21,000 containers have been distributed nationwide to date.

While earning a bachelor's degree in biology, Russell launched the Youth Ocean Conservation Summit to harness

youth enthusiasm for related issues. Six summits have convened hundreds of concerned young change-makers and adult professionals. "Young people learn about current threats to marine life and become inspired by peers sharing ideas and successes," says Russell. Planning and skill-building sessions fuel action, often assisted by microgrants to help kick-start community projects.

Russell is also involved with the nonprofit EarthEcho International, which activates young leaders through peer-to-peer networks. One recent campaign, 3T4E, encouraged youth worldwide to pick up three pieces of trash on November 1 and document their efforts. Nearly 2 million social media impressions later, they've reached youth in 24 states, in 19 countries and on six continents, according to Executive Director Mia DeMezza.

Founded by siblings Philippe and Alexandra Cousteau, the Washington, D.C., EarthEcho shares service learning stories that record steps young people are taking to mitigate local waterway issues. In a virtual classroom field trip series, they can explore issues such as oceanic dead zones and acidification through

dynamic multimedia presentations. "These young people are going to inherit the problems we've created, and deserve a seat at the table," says DeMezza.

Given the opportunity, youth can play a key role in conservation, research and policy making for Earth's oceans. "I look at youth not as leaders of the future, but leaders of today," says Russell.

Daniela Fernandez, 23, is one of the youth leaders working to bridge the generational divide on ocean conservation issues. An undergraduate at Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C., she was invited to a 2013 United Nations (UN) meeting to address the state of the world's oceans. When she inquired if they had social media outlets to share their discussions, she discovered they did not. The 2016 Christopher Benchley Ocean Award winner relates, "I returned to campus with a sense of urgency about the issues I learned about, which led me to start a nonprofit to connect Millennials with the oceans."

The resulting Sustainable Oceans Alliance (SOA) has since hosted three global ocean summits with participants from more than 30 colleges and universities, learning directly from leaders in government, science, business and policy. Summit-watch parties at embassies around the world enabled Millennials to submit questions and comments online. Consequently, Secretary of State John Kerry's office partnered with SOA to incorporate a youth component in the state department's 2016 Our Ocean Conference.

The SOA, recognized by the United Nations as a game-changing initiative, has catalyzed 30 chapters on U.S. campuses, with plans to expand to Britain, Chile and Spain. Actionable steps include advocating for college curricula on ocean health. Already, the alliance has helped sway global policy, gathering 30,000 signatures petitioning that ocean conservation be included in UN sustainable development goals. It also mobilized youth advocating for the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument, America's first marine monument (measuring a bit larger than Yellowstone National Park),

off of Cape Cod, created by former President Obama in 2016.

Russell and Fernandez agree that rallying around solutions is key to engaging youths and adults alike.

“You can talk about the problems all day long, but it’s solutions that inspire people to take action,” says Russell.

Fernandez adds, “Often, people feel helpless in the face of big issues, but

if you give them a simple way to help, they will get behind it.”

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WHAT WE CAN DO NOW

Everyone has a part to play in keeping oceans clean and healthy. Here are some ways concerned individuals of all ages can help.

DO AWAY WITH DISPOSABLE PLASTICS. Use reusable alternatives to single-use plastics such as plastic bags, water bottles, to-go containers, takeaway cups and straws, all of which clog the oceans and endanger 600 aquatic species due to ingestion or entanglement.

GREEN WHAT DRAINS. Anything that washes down the drain can end up in waterways. Avoid dumping chemicals like paint, oil and solvents and opt for non-toxic cleaning products like DIY cleaners made from vinegar and baking soda, which are safe for people and the seas.

EAT SMART. Per a 2016 United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization report, nearly a third of commercial fish stocks are now fished at dangerously unsustainable levels. Find best choices on the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s downloadable sustainable seafood guide and app at SeafoodWatch.org when dining or shopping, and ask seafood eateries and fish counters to carry ocean-friendly selections.

REDUCE FERTILIZERS. Fertilizer runoff from gardens and commercial agriculture eventually end up in oceans, leading to “dead zones” with low levels of oxygen that kill aquatic life.

CUT ENERGY USE. Carbon dioxide from fossil fuel consumption is turning oceans acidic, which is particularly harmful to coral reefs. Use energy-efficient appliances and vehicles, opt for renewable energy plans from local utilities and bike, walk and take public transit.

Primary sources: Ocean.si.edu; Ocean.org; Ocean.NationalGeographic.com