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Out of the Ashes: How the Tragedy of September 11 Left Its Mark on the National Marine Sanctuary System

By Elizabeth Moore

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"When Americans lend a hand to one another, nothing is impossible. We're not about what happened on 9/11. We're about what happened on 9/12."

—Jeff Parness, 9/11 Survivor and Founder of New York Says Thank You

Every generation has turning point moments, those events that are marked indelibly in our memories and our shared history, that define *before* and *after* moments in our lives. The bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963 and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968. The Apollo moon landing on July 20, 1969. The loss of the space shuttle *Challenger* on Jan. 26, 1986. Twenty years ago this month, we witnessed the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001, the event we now call 9/11.



The 9/11 Pentagon Memorial, photographed here in 2019, contains a Memorial Unit for each of those killed--both on the flight and in the Pentagon--when Flight 77 crashed into the building. Each Memorial Unit is a cantilevered, granite-topped bench, a lighted pool of flowing water, and the name of each victim etched in the stainless steel of the bench. The trees were added by the U.S. Forest Service in 2002 as the Living Memorial Project. Image: Cecilio Ricardo/U.S. Forest Service.

On the morning of Sept. 10, 2001, I boarded an LA-bound flight out of Dulles for a trip to Hawai'i where I was working with the then newly-designated Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve. The next morning, an LA-bound flight out of Dulles was hijacked and crashed into the Pentagon, killing all 184 passengers. It wasn't the same flight, but the question still haunts me two decades later: what if I'd left a day later? I wasn't on Flight 77, nor were any other NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries staff members on any of the four hijacked planes that day, but we still lost people on Flight 77 who were connected and precious to us.

That gorgeous September morning, eight people boarded Flight 77 bound for the adventure of a lifetime. Washington, D.C. sixth-graders Bernard Brown II, Asia Cottom, and Rodney Dickens; their teachers Hilda Taylor, Sarah Clark, and James Debeuneure respectively; and National Geographic employees Joe Ferguson and Ann Judge were headed to Santa Barbara, California, to participate in a National Geographic Photo Camp alongside the Sustainable Seas Expeditions. The Sustainable Seas Expeditions were a five-year project by the National Marine Sanctuary System and National Geographic to explore sanctuaries in the minibus *DeepWorker*, with many classrooms around the country following along with associated lesson plans.



This photo of those who were flying out to participate in a National Geographic Photo Camp alongside the Sustainable Seas Expedition was taken at Dulles Airport before Flight 77 took off. From left to right: teacher James D. Debeuneure, student Rodney Dickens, student Bernard C. Brown II, teacher Hilda E. Taylor, student Asia S. Cottom, teacher Sara M. Clark, and National Geographic staffers Joe Ferguson and Ann Judge. Photo: Gwen Faulkner, courtesy of National Geographic.

James and Rodney represented Ketcham Elementary School; Sarah and Asia, Backus Middle School; and Hilda and Bernard, Leckie Elementary School. Rodney, Asia, and Bernard were headed to Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary to explore, hike, kayak, and participate as part of the National Geographic Photo Camp. These young students would be sharing their experiences with children all over the nation. Instead, those who loved them—who had left them excited at the airport only hours before—learned the terrible truth when their plane was hijacked and crashed into the Pentagon at 9:37 a.m.

In the moments, hours, and days afterward, our office was faced with questions that had no easy answers. How to reconcile such an unthinkable tragedy and the new world in which we found ourselves in that *after* moment. How to honor the memory of those school children, teachers, colleagues, and the nearly 3,000 other lost lives on that tragic day in our nation's history. How to ensure that something good and life-affirming came out of a hate-driven terrorist attack. We found two ways to do so: naming a new research vessel and creating Ocean for Life.

Research Vessel *Joe Ferguson*

Our vessels are vital to our operations, as platforms for at-sea research, education, enforcement, and exploration. When the first research vessel after 9/11 was obtained, there was universal approval to name it for Joe Ferguson, who had been so crucial for the success of the Sustainable Seas Expeditions. As the director of education and outreach for the National Geographic Society, Joe was well-known and liked by sanctuary staff from across the system, a trusted partner in the Sustainable Seas Expedition including its two-week visit to Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary in 1999.



R/V *Joe Ferguson*, shown here at its dedication ceremony in 2002, carried scientists and educators to Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary for seven years. Its replacement vessel in 2009, also named *Joe Ferguson*, continues to support sanctuary science today. Image: NOAA.



Ann Judge and Joe Ferguson. As a National Geographic friend recalled at a tribute to them, "Together they taught me some things: persevere, always love your Mama, dance when you can, it's okay to love your dog like a child, be passionate about what you believe in, be proud of your roots, cherish your friends, a little irreverence is okay—a lot of irreverence is sometimes better." Image courtesy of National Geographic.

On Feb. 19, 2002, the sanctuary dedicated R/V *Joe Ferguson*, a 41-foot vessel originally belonging to the U.S. Coast Guard, as its new research vessel. At the dedication ceremony, Reed Bohne, at the time the superintendent of the sanctuary, said: "The staff at Gray's Reef felt it was important to name the vessel in Joe's honor in recognition of all he has done to educate students about the marine environment and America's ocean treasures." After seven years of bringing scientists and educators to sea, carrying out diving operations, and maintaining mooring buoys, the first R/V *Joe Ferguson* was retired.

In 2009, a new vessel, a 41-foot catamaran, was given the same name and continues serving as the primary research vessel for the sanctuary today. "Since its dedication in 2002, the R/V *Joe Ferguson* has provided an essential platform for the operations we conduct at Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary," said Stan Rogers, sanctuary superintendent. "Gray's Reef is a catalyst for scientific research in the South Atlantic Bight, and it is situated 19 miles from land. Our research vessels such as the R/V *Joe Ferguson* are critical tools scientists use to help us understand the ocean, the creatures that live there, and the pristine live-bottom habitat that the sanctuary protects."

Ocean For Life



Ocean for Life students share a piece of country and culture with each other as part of a community circle activity. Photo: Claire Fackler/NOAA

When the 9/11 Commission Report was released on July 22, 2004, it recommended that the U.S. “rebuild the scholarship, exchange, and library programs that reach out to young people and offer them knowledge and hope,” and affirmed: “Education that teaches tolerance, the dignity and value of each individual, and respect for different beliefs is a key element in any global strategy to eliminate Islamist terrorism.” The sanctuary system had already begun planning just such a program as a tribute to and remembrance of the students and teachers lost on Flight 77, based on the field experience of discovery and adventure that was planned for them.

In summer 2004, two field study experiences co-hosted with National Geographic--like those planned for Rodney, Asia, and Bernard--were held when 12 high school student/teacher pairs from all over the country visited Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary in July and another dozen pairs went to Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary in August. During each field study, the students heard from scientists and other experts and visited and photographed different habitats and wildlife associated with each sanctuary. Each field study ended with Youth Media Project presentations the students constructed from their photographs and narratives. The field studies proved that this student-centered, field-focused experience had potential to build connections among young people and provided the impetus for the next step--the creation of Ocean for Life.



During their two-week field study, Ocean for Life students partake in a variety of stewardship activities, such as this beach cleanup and assessment. Photo: Claire Fackler/NOAA

Ocean for Life was designed as an ocean science and cultural exchange program for high school students from Western and Middle Eastern countries. Using national marine sanctuaries as living classrooms--including Florida Keys, Greater Farallones, Cordell Bank, Monterey Bay, and Channel Islands national marine sanctuaries--115 students from 17 countries and all over the U.S. came together for two-week immersive Ocean for Life field studies in 2009, 2011, and 2013. Together, they explored, filmed, photographed, and shared what they had learned, and built bonds with each other with the understanding that the ocean connects us all.

With inspiration from sources as diverse as Ernest Hemingway's "Old Man and the Sea" and Dr. Suess's "One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish," the students worked with graduate students from American University's Center for Environmental Filmmaking to film, narrate, score, and edit short videos as their Youth Media Projects. The videos featured multi-lingual narration, musical compositions, beautiful images, cultural influences, and the heart-felt words of the students. In the end, through shared days in sun and surf and shared evenings around campfires, in joint creative endeavors, in traveling and working side by side, the students shared their greatest discovery: one world and one ocean.

Participant Legacy of Ocean for Life

The impact of the program on the participants has been deeply felt. Some of those effects were immediate. A number of American students indicated that they were considering studying Arabic, Middle Eastern culture, and/or international relations in college, while others had a newfound

interest in pursuing careers related to marine science and conservation. Others started environmental clubs, made presentations about their experiences, or conducted conservation projects in their communities. Most agreed the experience had been life-changing.



Brijonnay Madrigal preparing to snorkel at Santa Cruz Island in NOAA's Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary during her Ocean for Life experience in 2011. Photo: Claire Fackler/NOAA



Brijonnay Madrigal, a Dr. Nancy Foster Scholar and PhD candidate at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa conducting her research in 2020. Courtesy: Brijonnay Madrigal

At least a few students have continued to chart their futures along ocean lines. Brijonnay Madrigal, an alumna of the 2011 Ocean for Life field study, has followed a NOAA path, earning a NOAA Hollings undergraduate scholarship, interning and working for a variety of NOAA offices including Monterey Bay and Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale national marine sanctuaries, and is now a 2020 Dr. Nancy Foster Scholar (<https://fosterscholars.noaa.gov/>) and Ph.D. student in the Marine Mammal Research Program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Brijonnay's research is focused on characterizing the acoustic behavior of toothed marine mammals (odontocetes) in Hawai'i and how human-generated noise affects them.



Hannah MacDonald showing a new Ocean for Life friend from the Middle East a sea star during her field experience in 2013. Image: Claire Fackler/NOAA



Hannah MacDonald in 2021. Image: Gavin MacDonald

Hannah MacDonald, an alumna of the 2013 Ocean for Life session, followed her summer experience by volunteering with Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, earning a NOAA Hollings undergraduate scholarship, and working for the headquarters office of the National Marine Sanctuary System. She is currently in graduate school and working for Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, continuing to pursue her passion for science communication.

Other impacts we have yet to see. These students stood on the cusp of adulthood during their Ocean for Life experiences; they are now college students and young professionals, perhaps parents with young children of their own. Who knows what lies in the future as the Ocean for Life alumni become the leaders, teachers, scientists, scholars, and conservation professionals of their nations and of the world?

Sanctuary System Legacy of Ocean for Life

Ocean for Life also left its impact on the National Marine Sanctuary System. Many of us who worked for the sanctuary system in 2001 still do today, including those who developed and conducted the Ocean for Life program. Claire Fackler, today our National Education Liaison and National Volunteer Coordinator, was one of the driving forces behind Ocean for Life. "I am so grateful for having had the opportunity to work with these multicultural students over the years and to still be in touch with many of them," she said of her experience. "These young adults are laying the foundation for a safer, more tolerant society and a healthy, more sustainable world."



Ocean for Life students get introduced to the marine life of kelp forest ecosystems at the University of California, Santa Barbara's REEF touch tanks to prepare for their future snorkeling adventure in NOAA's Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary. Photo: Taryn Ocko



Water quality monitoring was one element of the Ocean for Life field study, as showcased by Brooke of Florida in the foreground with Amira of Egypt (left) and Habib of Lebanon (right). Photo: Jim Webb/National Geographic Society

Unfortunately, even though sponsors like the Qatar Foundation International helped support the program, hard decisions had to be made as budgets grew tighter over the years and this passion project had to give way to other projects more directly tied to our mission. The 2013 Ocean for Life was the last, for now, but the sanctuary system remains committed to the project and what it stood for. The program might be revived, if funding ever became available, because the need for it is as strong as ever.

Connection






Multicultural students connect in a meaningful way during the Ocean for Life field studies. Photo: Bryanna Fiame, 2011 Ocean for Life student from American Samoa

We never fully recover from tragic turning point events like 9/11. Our pain eases and we find new ways to go on with our lives, but we also leave a part of ourselves behind, in three children who never had a chance to grow up, in three teachers who never returned to the classroom, in two colleagues who shared our passion for protecting and sharing our natural world. We do what we can to affirm what we know to be good in the world: kindness, empathy, compassion, care, and connection. We do what we can to remember, and live, the lessons that tragedies like 9/11 and global pandemics teach us about what is important in our lives.

Ocean for Life focused on connections: the ocean as a connected ecosystem, our connection to the ocean, our connection to each other. R/V *Joe Ferguson* was named for a man who believed education and travel were fundamental to a peaceful existence on and with this planet. In the fractious world we live in now, in tribute to all those lost on 9/11, let's remember we're about the things that happened on 9/12, and after.

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