

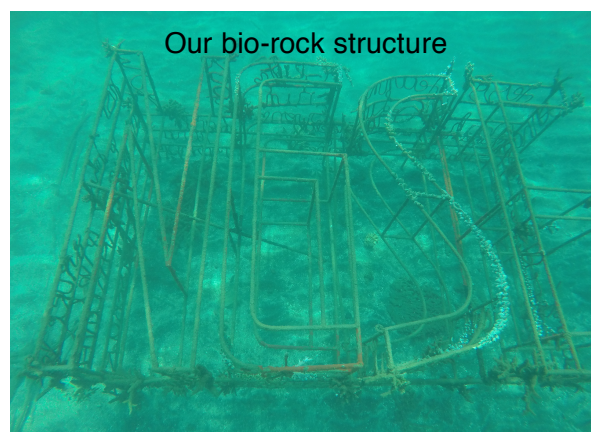


When I was young, I spent my afternoons diving in the deep depths of the ocean; completely lost in the kaleidoscopic pages of National Geographic magazine. Every corner of the page was inked with the bougainvillea pink of the corals, teeth-clean white sand, and microscopic fish who held the colours of an Eden. I was in total awe of the incalculable patterns - the gyri on corals, the diagonals on rays, and the stripes on sharks. Though the images were still as a statue I could feel the anemone dancing, fish darting and the hidden secrets of the quiet sand being uncovered. Through this lens I began to appreciate the diversity of life.

The oceans are populated by 228,450 species, but how many do we really understand? We look up in space with wonder, we send rockets to discover new life, yet we have an alien-like world on our own planet, of which 95% is left undiscovered. Simple questions like whether the cardinal fish is brown with yellow stripes or yellow with brown stripes remain unanswered.

National Geographic Student Expeditions (NGSE) gave me an opportunity to explore these questions beyond the pages of the magazine. I was chosen to be part of an intimate group of 15 teenagers who were selected to evaluate the health of the reefs along the coasts of Bali - specifically in Tulamben, Pemuteran, Ubud and Medewi. We travelled extensively through the regions of the island, learning local practices like free-diving, the language: Bahasa, and, most importantly, marine conservation.

We were taught how to conduct reef checks by identifying which corals were healthy, sick, and dying. In addition, we worked with a local dive centre in Pemuteran to create bio-rock structures that act as natural fish nurseries and promote bio-diversity in the reef. After we created them, I was a part of the dive team that submerged them in the water. When we weren't directly learning about



bio-diversity, we were experiencing it firsthand - surfing, canyoning, and learning about the culture in Bali.

When you look under the surface and beyond the decoration, you'll realise that the depths of diversity extend to the biological functioning of each organism as well. The way they respire, migrate, reproduce, are just few of the many characteristics that makes each species unique. For these underlying reasons, oceans are both the most diverse ecosystems and fascinating places on earth. In my eyes, there is a very profound correlation between the two - there is an undeniable beauty in diversity. So there's no reason why this principle can't extend above the water. If an anemone can protect a clown fish, why does terrorism in the name of religion exist? And if male sea-horses can bear the responsibility of child birth, why can't feminism prevail? If white-tip sharks and black-tip sharks can belong to the same family, then why can't people of different race share that same bond?

To be honest, I hadn't completely internalised that it was possible for humans to acquire such traits but the camp definitely changed that. As the only Indian in a group with 14 Americans, I was initially nervous and felt like an outsider in the pool. But the hours spent together in the underwater realm inspired me to come to the realisation that we aren't defined by our national identity. It's our passions, interest, dislikes that result in the strongest bonds. So it doesn't really matter if you are a white-tip or black-tip shark, if you both like sushi!

This camp also opened my eyes to everything they don't show on the pages of glossy magazines. These include coral bleaching, rising acidity levels, extinction of millennia old species and other anthropogenic effects. Though I was aware of these problems and often complained about the human impact on our environment, my experience in Bali shifted my notion of purpose. I am committed to making a real and proactive contribution. I realised that I don't want to be sitting on the seashore, waiting for governments or corporations or fisherman to ruin all that's beautiful under the water for economic gain. Life is not a spectator sport and unless someone like me cares enough to make a change, nothing is going to get better. I have never before felt a stronger determination to leave a footprint, one that is not carbon, and that's exactly what I intend to do.