

Getting Started as an Oceans for Youth Volunteer

Young children are naturally curious and have a desire to learn. And most kids are particularly interested in learning about the oceans. Volunteering to share your firsthand knowledge of the underwater world is a great way to help get them started on a path of ocean stewardship.

Schools welcome interesting speakers to talk to their classes, and the opportunity is often just a phone call away. Start by calling the school and speaking to the principal or administrator. Introduce yourself and describe your experiences as a diver and marine naturalist, and offer your time and talent as a volunteer. Ask the principal which grade levels and classes your type of presentation will be best suited for. You'll likely be introduced to the teacher so the two of you can talk to see how your experiences as a diver can supplement the required curriculum. Let them know what type of educational materials you can provide, including materials like this DVD.

Whenever possible, try to get involved at the beginning of the school year. This will give the teacher enough time to fully utilize your knowledge when crafting lesson plans.

Before you begin volunteering you'll likely be asked to undergo a background check before you are cleared to enter the classroom. This process may be as simple as completing a form, or could get as involved as being fingerprinted and photographed.

School volunteers are usually asked to sign in at the main office and obtain a visitor's pass. You may even be asked to leave your car keys at the office. In some schools, a security guard escorts visitors to the classroom.

The best way to understand and comply with school rules regarding student safety is to ask the principal or administrator to review all policies that pertain to volunteers.

Going Back to School

It doesn't pay to get in over your head, whether underwater or on land. When starting out as an Oceans for Youth school volunteer, pick small targets. High schoolers can be a tough audience, so consider starting with kids that are at least two feet shorter than you are, and working your way up once your game improves.

Become comfortable in a relatively small classroom setting before you concentrate on wowing large audiences. Remember to relax and be yourself. Let your enthusiasm for scuba diving and your fascination with the marine environment shine through and you'll be a big hit in the classroom.

You will be most effective when you can speak from personal experience, but whenever possible, back it up with a little research. For instance, if you're going to share a story about the time you swam with a green sea turtle off Grand Cayman island, make sure you can cover the basics like where these turtles live, what they eat, how big they grow, how long they live, etc. The Oceans for Youth web site www.oceansforyouth.org offers many educational resources.

Cater your presentation to the age and development level of the class. A good way to do find out what they're studying is to check out a textbook from the school's library and review it.

Ask the teacher for tips on how you can incorporate the lesson plan into your presentation. For instance, you may be able to use that week's vocabulary words in your talk.

Keep in mind that teachers have to cover a lot of subjects in a single school day, so you'll likely have a narrow time slot in which to give your presentation. The DVD has a number of sections that allow you to give any length presentation, or to return a number of times with fresh material. Be sure to allow a few minutes at the end for questions from the class. A Q&A section appears on the DVD. Feel free to design your own Q&A and skip back to the menu page or to another segment using the chapter page located in the upper left corner of the menu.

Make sure you stay in control of this time by directing the Q&A. Instead of asking a question, like "Who can tell me what sea turtles eat?" you might want to say, "Raise your hand if you can tell me what sea turtles eat." Kids can become excited very easily, and may forget their "classroom manners." Don't be afraid to maintain control of the class by reminding them to stay seated, raise their hands, etc. They're accustomed to a certain amount of structure and will accept direction when it's given in a firm but positive way. If necessary, ask the teacher to assist you in keeping things on track.

If you are a scuba diver with gear, a tank and regulator may be a hit in the classroom as an additional prop, and to explain how divers remain underwater. Hitting the purge button is always a hit.

It's a good idea to phone the school in a few days in advance of your presentation to make sure audiovisual equipment like a TV or computer monitor and DVD player will be available.

Good luck with your presentations. We hope the DVD helps and is a hit. And thank you.

How to Use this DVD

Famed ocean explorer Jean Michel Cousteau kindly provided most of the segments for this DVD, and is also featured on camera in the Introduction (found in the upper right corner of the DVD's main menu). When beginning your presentation, start by showing this two-minute introduction, which will describe the program and introduce you as a presenter. Jean Michel's warm introduction will help set the stage for getting the audience more in tune with the importance of the world's oceans.

Please note that special care and attention was given to protect the plants and animals portrayed in the DVD. We suggest that you not use live animals or specimens to supplement the presentations. Explain to the audience the delicate nature of the ecosystems they are studying and how important it is not to disturb them.

Make it Interactive

To a fourth grader, a set of scuba gear is completely fascinating, so pack your gear bag and bring your scuba gear with you. (Leave your dive knife at home, for safety reasons.) You'll be a big hit with the class simply by describing each piece of gear and how it works. If possible, bring a small "pony bottle" tank attached to a small buoyancy compensator (BC) and let the kids take turns trying it on. They'll be enthralled to learn how a scuba regulator works to provide a diver with breathing air while underwater.

Other props may include seashells or bottles you've collected while diving, and photos, magazines or books that illustrate what the underwater world is like.

Finally, for smaller kids, on this site are coloring book pages that you can print and take to hand out in the classroom

Identify Local Resources

Getting kids interested in exploring marine environments goes hand in hand with getting them interested in the marine environment. Make sure you identify local resources that will help fuel their interest, such as aquariums or museums, marine parks, or dive centers that offer the different kids programs (including scuba birthday parties).

If you intend to distribute printed material to the class, make sure the teacher approves it first. Business solicitations are usually frowned upon.

Invite Yourself Back

At the conclusion of your presentation, be sure to thank the students and the teacher for allowing you to spend time in the classroom sharing your adventures as a scuba diver. Let them know that you'd love to visit again. Follow up with the teacher within a few days to ask for feedback on how the kids enjoyed the presentation. Discuss with him or her ideas for future presentations.

Phone the principal or drop him or her a short note, thanking the school for allowing you to volunteer. A sincere thanks goes a long way.

Stay Involved and Get Others Involved

There's no such thing as too many volunteers in our schools. Be sure to tell your friends and dive buddies and the staff at your local dive center -- about how you are helping bring the marine environment into the classroom in a personal way. Perhaps they'd like to do the same at a school near them. Check the Oceans for Youth web site www.oceansforyouth.org frequently for updates and new educational materials.

Children need positive role models. And our marine environment needs fostering and protecting. By turning your experiences as a scuba diver into a way to volunteer at school, you'll be helping our kids and our oceans. And you'll be having fun, too. We guarantee it.

The Underwater World Needs Your Help

Thank you for taking the message of the ocean to kids. As more people look in the ocean, the world's marine environment will stand a greater chance of being jealously protected.

Sample Questions and Answers (Note: Q&A corresponds to info provided on DVD. Exceptions where noted.)

Spotted Dolphin

Q: Do you know what strategy dolphin use to find fish even in the dark?

A: They use echo location, sending off clicking sounds that return to them which is like underwater sonar.

Clown Fish

Q: Can you guess why the clown fish is acting like such a bully in the video?

A: They are protecting their home.

Cleaning Stations

Q: Why are the fish in this video acting so weird, is it something in the water?

A: They are trying to attract attention, it's their way of asking to see a doctor.

Rain Forests of the Sea

Q: Why is a coral reef like a rainforest?

A: Biological diversity. Coral reefs are rich in biodiversity, which is the total number of different plants and animals that live in a place. More marine species live on coral reefs than in any other type of ocean environment.

Manatees

Q: Why are manatees sometimes called "sea cows"?

A: Manatees, like cows, graze on plant material. A manatee can consume more than 100 pounds of plants in a single day.

Mangroves

Q: How do mangroves withstand the effects of tides and currents in order to stay in place?

A: Each mangrove tree sends out many curved roots. Mud collects around the roots and helps anchor the mangrove tree in place. Together, the roots of a group of mangrove trees create a dense "mat" of roots that works to slow water flow in a mangrove lagoon. This also helps prevent erosion and protects island shores from the effects of storms.

Marine Mammal Rescue

Q: What is the most difficult challenge that faces members of the marine mammal rescue team?

A: Capturing and helping marine mammals in the wild.

Elephant Seals

Q: What do male elephant seals fight over?

A: Territory. When two elephant seals fight, the winner gets to claim a large territory, or area, of the beach where female elephant seals reside. A group of female elephant seals is called a harem. The winning elephant seal will mate with the females, who will give birth to baby seals, called pups

Molly the Manta

Q: What makes Molly the Manta turn somersaults?

A: Manta rays often turn somersaults when feeding on tiny prey called zooplankton

Sharks and Rays

Q: What do all sharks have in common?

A: They are fishes. They lack a swim bladder. Their skeletons are made of cartilage instead of bone.

Eels

Q: Why do eels tie themselves in knots?

A: Eels use their bodies for leverage when capturing prey. Because eels lack appendages arms or legs or fins they tie themselves in knots to "hold" their prey.

Destroyer at Peace

Q: Why is Jean-Michel Cousteau wearing dive gear on board the ship?

A: Because he will ride the ship to the sea floor as it sinks.

Clownfish Anemones

Q: Why is the clownfish a bully?

A: Clownfish are territorial. They reside in an anemone. The anemone's stinging tentacles which do not harm the clownfish protect it from predators. In return, the clownfish "defends" the anemone. This relationship benefits both the clownfish and the anemone and is called mutualism.

Keiko the Whale

Q: What is the most important part of Keiko's training?

A: Untraining. After so many years in captivity, trainers must teach Keiko how to think for himself instead of responding to commands.

Deeper and Longer

Q: Do you know how divers were freed from their leashes?

A: The invention of an apparatus [name goes here] that allowed them to carry compressed air on their backs and breathe it through a device called a regulator.