

LEADER

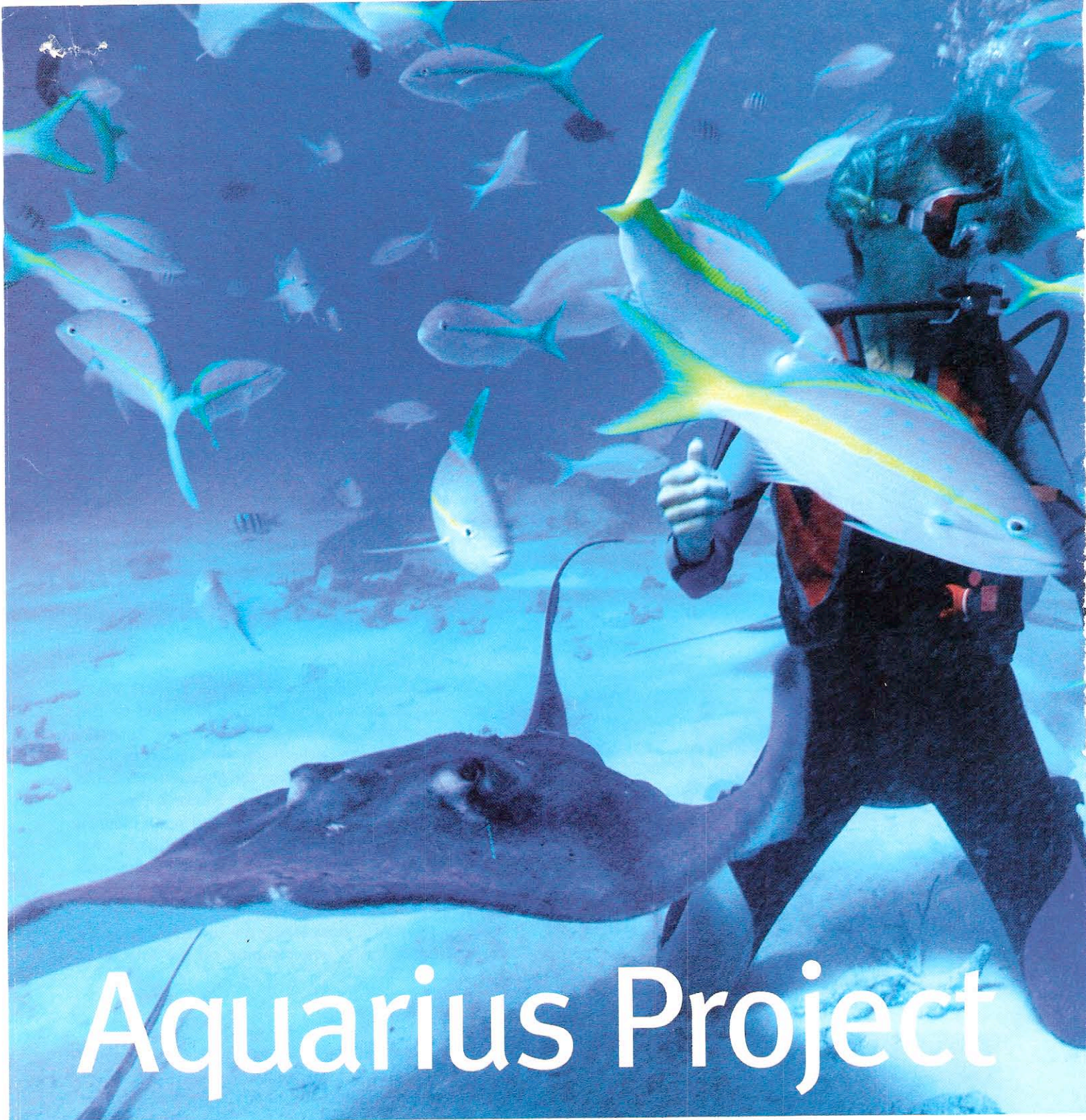
FOR ADULTS IN GIRL SCOUTING

VOL. 80, NO. 2



THE AQUARIUS PROJECT!

SCHOLARSHIPS FOR TEENS
NEW AWARDS FOR ADULT VOLUNTEERS




Aquarius Project

Amazing Underwater Adventure

By Jill Hamburg Coplan

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Girl Scouts of the USA give Girl Scouts an exciting chance to explore the Aquarius Habitat, the only marine science undersea laboratory in the world.



IT'S A HUMID AUGUST MORNING in Key Largo, Florida, the country's southernmost point. Below the bright turquoise waters lies North America's largest living coral reef. And on the shore today, six Girl Scouts in bathing suits and sneakers are hauling gear from their borrowed condo into waiting passenger vans. The temperature is already approaching three digits.

EXPLORING THE DEPTHS

It's the first day of the debut year of the Aquarius Project 2002, a five-day wider opportunity sponsored by GSUSA and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Office of Ocean Exploration.

Before the day is over, the girls will snorkel to conch shells the size of basketballs, don dive suits, tanks and gauges, record on waterproof writing slates and videocams, and go through their sunscreen and brown-bag lunches.

AMAZING REEF

In the coming days these six Girl Scouts, plus three adult chaperones with diving expertise, will explore and monitor the amazing reef, with its surrounding meadows of flowering seagrass and exotic mangrove forests nursing millions of fish. The girls will be part of marine science and career seminars. And on a culminating 60-foot dive, the girls will visit a technological marvel: Aquarius Habitat, the world's only permanent research station located on the ocean floor.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION

"I wanted to be a marine biologist since I was in second grade," says Michelle, 16, a participant from the Girl Scouts of San Jacinto Council (Houston, Texas). "But I've never been able to go on dives because it's so much money. It was my avenue to explore what I'd like to be doing for the rest of my life."

AQUARIUS PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

Kelly Caldwell, 16, Van Nuys, Calif.
Elizabeth Gastes, 18, Woodbridge, Va.
Alexis Kuiper, 14, Fairfax, Va.
Halle Minshall, 14, Shaker Heights, Ohio
Kate Plumley, 14, Bluefield, W. Va.
Michelle Riley, 16, Cypress, Texas

The girls, chosen in a national selections process, had flown in the day before from Texas, West Virginia, Ohio, Virginia and California, in time for dinner, capped off by key lime pie and a spectacular sunset.

Now, van loaded, they're joined by their three scientist guides from NOAA, who designed the program and quickly turned into role models. Michelle was excited to learn about researcher Catalina Martinez's work on turtle communities in Hawaii and Puerto Rico. "She's my complete idol!" says Michelle, who hopes to study marine biology at Texas A&M.

Chatting together in the van, the group heads off into the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary to meet their pontoon dive boat. Today, they'll begin building a foundation of skills so they can take different measures of the reef's exotic animal and plant species.

CHALLENGES ABOUND

Today's seas were calm, though they can be alarmingly choppy. First, the girls review their scuba skills, adjust their equipment and choose dive buddies. Suddenly, the first open-water predators of the trip come to greet them: nurse sharks, swimming by the boat in formation.

Plunging underwater, they meet other creatures: long-spined sea urchin, lobster, parrotfish, groupers and yellow-tail snappers. Later, they'll see barracuda and stingrays.

"We worried that the daily schedule would be too fast-paced, but it turned out we weren't fast enough for



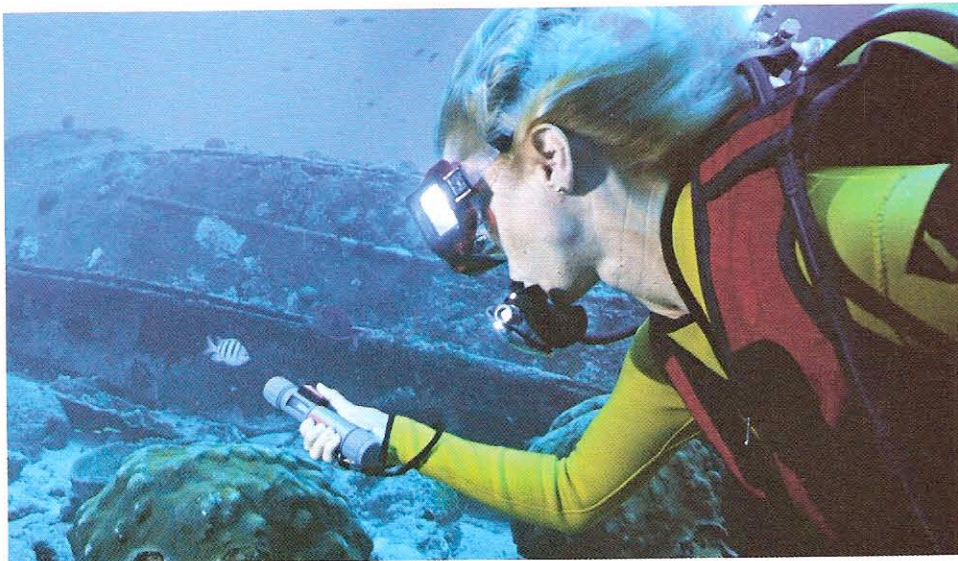
Girls used writing tablets to plot dimensions.

Michael Heil, NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration



by Kelley, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

Whether exploring the depths or studying tiny ocean life, girls were in awe.



down and discover eel colonies living in a shipwrecked World War II freighter.

Working smoothly together, they practice scientific collaboration and species identification. Then dinner, an awards ceremony, gift exchanges and farewells.

ON-GOING PROJECTS

The experience, Commander Flanders says, left her wishing there had been similar opportunities for girls when she was growing up. "Women are under-represented in the ocean sciences," she says. What's so rewarding about the Aquarius Project, now an annual event, "is seeing how it could spark some of the girls to continue this kind of work."

Indeed, Eighth-grader Halle's back-home project, on the effect of chemicals on bioluminescent plankton (done

with help from new NOAA contacts), has taken top prizes at her school's and district's science fairs. Participant Alexis, has spoken before various groups and published articles on ocean conservation and her Florida experiences. In fact, this April, Alexis had her own temporary exhibit on her Aquarius visit at the Goddard Space Center in Washington, D.C. Kate, from the Girl Scouts of Black Diamond Council (Charleston, West Virginia), has also given talks throughout her area.

It's all exactly what NOAA's Michael Kelly, the program coordinator, had in mind. "I watched six teenage girls at the beginning of the week turn into informed, committed constituents. They were really able to develop big, visionary plans for themselves."

In Her Own Words

Excerpts from the Girls' Ship Diaries

"Down at the 80-year-old Benwood shipwreck, one group counted fish in one zone, another group measured depth, and my group video-recorded. The dive went perfectly! At our next dive, a cloud of barracudas hovered nearby watching us. By 11:30, we had already completed two dives!

After lunch, we gathered plankton samples and observed them. We tested the ocean's salinity, measured water visibility, and surveyed cloud formations and wind speed. We ended the day with a beautiful coral reef dive at shallow waters!"

"On the last day of our special adventure into the saltwater world, we heard a presentation on how reefs are damaged and how divers can help track fish species. Then we practiced our own fish-identification skills.

Tomorrow, we will become honorary ambassadors of ocean conservation. But tonight, I have my dreams: Six stoplight butterflyfish? Check. Two yellowtail damselfish? Check. Three stoplight parrotfish? Check..."

"Before the Aquarius Project, I needed to learn how to scuba dive. I learned lots of new terminology, like nitrox and buoyancy compensators.

Before I knew it, I could do it! I could gently float under the water, check out the landscape, and redirect the blue gill fish nibbling on my ear. When you scuba dive, you can really see the relationship between life, living and science."

"Today was absolutely amazing! The water was so warm it was like taking a bath. There were so many schools of fish, just gathered all over the place, all I could do was stare. We came up under the floor of the Aquarius, removed our tanks, and after a few minutes of breathing, I sounded like Alvin and the Chipmunks!

Wow: What a place to work! All the scientists were really cool! This has to be one of the most amazing things I've ever done."

Jill Hamburg Coplan is a freelance magazine writer and mother in Brooklyn, N.Y., who regularly covers women's health, sports and fitness, money matters and parenting.