

My Love Affair with The Sea:
LOOKING THROUGH A NEW LENS
by Jennifer Palmer



Students working with sustainable agriculture



Hwa Choong students with Balinese high school dancers



The Hwa Chong School with Sally Silverstone and Jen Palmer



Students working in the monsoon forest

As a self proclaimed mermaid, I have been drawn to the sea throughout my entire life. My earliest, and fondest, childhood memories are of watching sea turtles nest along the coast of my home state of Florida in the U.S., as well as swimming with manatees in crystal clear waters. I dreamed of becoming a marine biologist, studying whales and traveling the world. I would spend hours gazing at the open ocean hoping that one day, I would get to explore her waters, befriend her wildlife, and drift to sleep to the sweet sounds of her waves.

Over time, these dreams became my reality as I have spent the past 20 or so years in about 35+ countries around the world; researching, teaching and learning about our ocean. Sadly, I have seen coral reefs vanish before my eyes, brilliant colors fade and fish vanish. The breathtakingly beautiful beaches that were once adorned with sea shells, are now covered in plastic bags, discarded packages, old flip flops, cigarette lighters and debris that could tell a million stories from a million miles away. Wildlife that was once so prevalent out at sea, is increasingly more difficult to find. It is clear, the impacts of humans have deeply altered the magical underwater world that I love so dearly. The ocean has been the biggest love affair and heartache of my life. Yet, I remain hopeful and optimistic, as all hopeless romantics must be.

Over the past few weeks, I was honored to join the team of the Biosphere Foundation in NW Bali. Together, we led education and stewardship programs with 11 students from Dalton Academy, Beijing and with 23 students from Hwa Chong Institution in Singapore. Most of the students were city kids and had never lived in nature, or experienced the underwater world live and up close. Until this week, not a single one of them had never seen a sky full of stars on a clear night, and they certainly had no idea what these natural realms meant

for their lives back at home. We shared eight days together, exploring and cleaning up the fragile mangrove forest that protects the island, hiking through jungles teeming with life, meeting local Balinese students, and disconnecting from the “plugged in” world to reconnect with nature. I watched as these students marveled at what they experienced. The sounds of birds screeching and geckos squawking, the constant stream of moths and insects that swarmed them at night, the monkeys swinging up above their heads and deer that peeked through the bushes, the sheer diversity and color of the tropical fish and corals. Together, we were in awe.

The Biosphere Foundation Stewardship Program in NW Bali has a unique approach to inspiring youth stewards for our ocean. The concept is to let students experience a new way of being and learn through observation and thought. Although most of these students may never become marine biologists, SCUBA divers, or experts in conservation, they will remember the endless moments when they realized that we are all connected, to one another and to nature. Through the wind and waves, the ripples of actions they take now and in the future will better our world.

There were many quiet moments in Bali when I witnessed both the beauty and the struggle of our ocean and environment through a completely new lens, the lens of a teenager. Without the heartache of knowing what once was, these students have the ability to dream of what can be. Through their vision, determination, kindness and understanding that we are all linked in one way or another, they offered me the gift of renewed hope. I am reminded that each one of us has the ability to paint whatever picture we aspire for our future. In honor of these young ambassadors from Singapore who touched my heart, I will begin my picture with the turquoise blue waters of Bali, teeming with wildlife and a hopeful future.