

Inspiring a green future, one student at a time



By Alice Irwin

Every day we hear of news of the worsening plight of our global environment: air and water pollution, rainforest destruction, diversion of the natural flow of waterways, unsustainable mining practices, toxic waste dumps,... the list of mankind's shortsighted practices and the devastating results has no limits. What to do? It's easy to feel helpless, feel that the environment is the victim of big governments and big businesses and that's just the way it is.

Thankfully, there are people who dedicate their lives to being a force for positive change, promoting awareness and inspiring others to take action through their example. A local woman has dedicated nearly her entire life as an advocate for the environment and animals and now has kicked her passion into high gear with a new and exciting venture. Ontario's **Diane DiGravio** is one of those people whose energy, intensity, and devotion to her beliefs seem almost limitless. A wife, mother, and full time educator, Diane has founded a new organization, Eco Outreach International, with the mission of promoting ecological awareness for both youth and adults through hands-on Eco Tourism experiences.

Diane's love of animals and the environment began at an early age. She reflects, "Jane Goodall has become an icon for environmental awareness and has inspired me since I was a little girl. For as long as I can remember, I have followed Jane Goodall's accomplishments. Her love, compassion and dedication to wildlife have earned her the title of United Nations Messenger of Peace." DiGravio earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Zoology, and began working on a Master of Science in Immunology. She was a scientific researcher for over 10 years, working at a major pharmaceutical company in the areas of virology and immunobiological research.

Her path took a huge turn as she realized how few women worked in scientific disciplines, and explains "I woke up one day and decided I wanted to change the world." And so, just before completing her Masters in Immunology at New York Medical College, she enrolled at the University of Rochester where she received a Master of Science degree in Secondary Education. What better way to begin to start "changing the world" than through working with children? Her scientific and environmental passion and vision have been a perfect fit with her career, inspiring students at both Wayne Central and Webster Central Schools as a Biology and General Science teacher. Diane's students share her love of animals and the natural world, and she emphasizes "My students have been my motivator to continue to reach for the stars. My passions are reflected in what I do. I truly model the behavior I'd like to see my students adopt."

Diane has traveled extensively throughout the US as part of animal rescue efforts, relocating them to appropriate sanctuaries. Her devotion to animal rescue and conservation heightened even more after viewing the documentary *Blackfish*, a compelling view into the treatment of animals in captivity, specifically those in the entertainment industry. Schools across the country incorporated the documentary as part of the curriculum. She was astonished at her students' reaction to the film, saying "I was not prepared for my students' high level of interest. Within the days that followed their viewing of the documentary, they completely overwhelmed me with questions and enthusiasm for how they could make a change for orcas in captivity."

Wanting to spread the message to an even wider, more diverse audience, together with friend and fellow environmental advocate **Martha Sullivan**, she co-organized a symposium called *The Blackfish Brigade* which was held in Rochester last May. Speakers included several former trainers from *Sea World* and *Marineland* as well as conservation advocates and students. Discussions were focused around various ecosystems and human impact on them, effects of captivity on animals, how to move forward with education, and more. "The public needs to know that they have a voice!" Diane emphasized.

In an effort to share her concern for the rapid decimation of the world's rainforests and the subsequent impact to those ecosystems, Diane organized several trips with students to Costa Rica so they could experience this fragile environment in person and reinforce what can be done by individuals and groups to slow and hopefully stop and reverse the destruction.

To Diane, the next logical step was to broaden "the insight into the impact of human beings on the environment, and to foster a greater appreciation of our natural habitats." The vehicle for her delivery of this message would be through providing *Eco Tourism* opportunities and promoting outreach projects. Group destinations include Costa Rica, Ecuador, the Grand Canyon, and Yellowstone National Park. This summer's trip to Costa Rica will include a visits to volcanoes, forest hikes to observe the vast variety of wildlife, trips to hot springs and beaches, a boat trip to observe Humpback whales and dolphins, and a night tour to witness sea turtles nesting and laying their eggs.

Even more important and exciting than observing these wonders of nature will be a variety of community service projects over the course of the 11 day trip. Previous trips have included working with the local citizens to assist in home and school restoration projects using *eco-friendly* paints and other materials. DiGravio is passionate about the environment-focused projects they undertake, saying "Reforestation projects help rebuild habitats which have been negatively impacted by man. Reforestation not only serves to improve the biodiversity within these fragile habitats but it can also improve the quality of human life by removing high levels of carbon from the atmosphere. Miles of beach cleanup helps preserve areas which are known for both the breeding of the Humpback Whale and nesting of Olive Ridley Sea Turtle. Visitors come from around the globe to see the massive arrival of both of these marine creatures!"

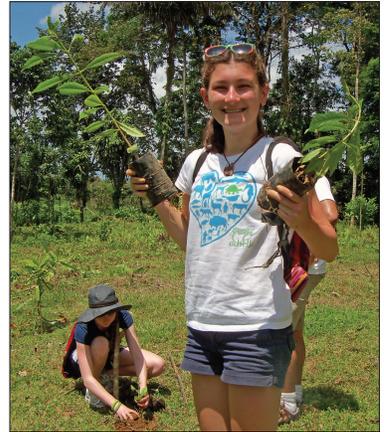


Assisting in cleaning up the beaches helps keep the environment healthy for the sea turtles that call them home.

It's been quite an adventure for the little girl who grew up admiring Jane Goodall, the child who followed her passions and dreams to become a scientist and educator. Diane DiGravio's lifetime of dedication to animals and the environment is truly inspirational.

She's currently writing grants and exploring options for fundraising to assist in financing tours to assist children whose families may not be able to afford the trips. Her focus never wavers and she will continue to make a difference by reinforcing her message "One voice can change the world!"

For more information on Eco Outreach International's educational tours visit <http://www.ecooutreachinternational.com>, call (585) 330-4925 or e-mail info@ecooutreachinternational.com



Four participants have assisted Costa Rican farmers replace trees that were lost due to poor weather conditions. The farmers invited the group to their home to plant the trees, and offered them lunch in exchange for their work.

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