

An Underwater Classroom: Center for Field Studies' SCUBA-intensive NCLC 498 Coral Reef Ecology trip to The Bahamas

by Penny Gilchrist



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Mason's Center for Field Studies (CFS) is dedicated to providing students with exciting and challenging field-based experiential learning opportunities. CFS course offerings include a broad range of academic disciplines and subject matters, from a focus on the natural world to human populations in their respective social and cultural contexts. Students are given the opportunity to move beyond the traditional classroom and apply their knowledge and data collection skills firsthand in a variety of "real world" settings.

Housed in New Century College, CFS provides opportunities to all Mason students and faculty. The following story is one student's experience with NCLC 498, Coral Reef Ecology, offered every spring semester.

Cameron Albert has always been fascinated by the world beneath the ocean. A George Mason University Biological Studies major with a concentration in microbiology, he traveled to The

Bahamas with his NCLC 498, Coral Reef Ecology classmates for an underwater classroom experience.

New Century College's Center for Field Studies trip organized the trip, during which the 18 students and faculty lived as part of an active ship community aboard the Morning Star, a 65' sailboat. The class's instructors, Mike Henley and Professor Tom Wood, Mason's Dive Safety Officer, led the students on three or four daily dives, during which they explored ocean life in relation to marine ecosystem sustainability.

Albert is an experienced diver, but most of his fellow students had only recently learned to dive in Mason's scuba program (PHED 255). Regardless of experience, everyone quickly acclimated to the rigorous sailing and diving lifestyle: "We woke up on the boat, watched the sunrise together, had breakfast, and then went down for our first dive," says Albert. "Dives lasted up to one hour, alternating between breaks for meals and discussion." Students were also given the option to learn to sail the boat.

"It was probably one of the best things I've done at Mason," Albert says. "I learned more in a week of field studies than I could have in three months of class. Professor Wood taught us names of corals and fish, and set the groundwork of knowledge about reef ecology. Until you go into the 3D world of water, you can't experience breaks in formation, coral reef damage from hurricanes and global warming—the breadth and depth of the ocean and the world it encompasses."



When diving at night, the students used underwater lights to view large nocturnal fish, along with special night vision goggles to illuminate the surrounding coral's fluorescent colors.

Other highlights included SCUBA diving in an ocean "blue hole"—rare underwater sinkholes that attract unusual fish, swimming with sharks, snorkeling in mangroves, and beach picnics. The last day included a visit to the Island School on Cape Eleuthera, where undergraduate students maintain a sustainable ecosystem community and teach local island children to do the same. "They were an international grouping of students who care about the environment and want to build a better world," says Cameron. "They inspired us to make a difference."

Albert describes his trip as the experience of a lifetime. He especially enjoyed living closely with like-minded students, many of whom continue to get together to study and hang out on campus. They also plan to become officers in the Mason SCUBA club.