

Life's biggest lesson

Growing up diving has shaped the very being of a boy from a land-locked Southern U.S. state

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THE SUN HAD BEEN DOWN A LONG TIME AS I STOOD on the dive deck of the boat, staring down at the vast pitch blackness churning at my feet. The clear blue ocean had become a menacing force of total darkness. Back at the dive stations, people were checking their air and putting on their wet suits. But I had checked my gear a hundred times already.

Thoughts began to race around my mind. What was awaiting me down below, in that big unknown? The big predators come out at night. What if something goes wrong? What if I can't find my way back to the boat? Or my light goes out? What kind of an 11-year-old with even relatively good sense would leave the security of a perfectly good boat and jump into a world where he really doesn't belong?

"Watch out for the sea wasps!" were the last words I heard as my fins hit the water for my very first night dive. Too late! After a quick OK signal back to the boat, I plunged into the darkness. I decided to descend quite a bit before turning on my light. I didn't want to attract the sea wasps. Whatever they are.

When I finally turned on my light, I was greeted by the divemaster – who was immediately signalling "Shark!" I turned and looked, and in my beam I could see four large reef sharks, exceptionally close. I could hear my heart rate increase and feel my breathing quicken as I sucked down my air.

The divemaster calmly grabbed my arm and asked if I was OK. Sure! "OK," I signalled back. We began a controlled, leisurely descent.

Once we reached the bottom, I relaxed and began to enjoy the mysteries of the darkness. I remember best the beautiful octopus and the lightning show of hovering squid ... and of course the always-circling sharks, who did not live up to *Jaws*.

At my safety stop I gazed back down into the blackness and thought not only about what I had just done but more importantly, what I had just seen. By conquering my fear, I had been rewarded with access to a whole new world, unseen by



most. It left me with a deep desire to return to it, to learn about it, to protect it.

So how does a boy from the state of Kentucky – not even remotely close to an ocean – acquire a love of the sea? My personal history is pretty unusual. I was born very prematurely, at 26 weeks, and weighed less than one pound. At the suggestion of my pediatrician, I learned to swim for my lungs. Growing up, my mother had a unique philosophy for child rearing. Each year on my birthday, she didn't give me the faddish toys of the time. We would travel somewhere instead.

At the age of 7, I boarded my first sailboat across the Caribbean. Some of my earliest recollections are of skipping across the ocean on a wooden sailing ship, feeling the rocking of the sea and the warmth of the wooden decks on my bare feet, sleeping on deck under a canopy of falling stars, playing pirate on

SEA CHANGE

Coleman has come a long way from his first certified dive in Bimini, at the age of 10 (above), including the Turks and Caicos Islands (below) and the Kittiwake wreck in the Cayman Islands.





CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Two years after securing junior open-water diver status, Coleman was diving with sharks in the Turks and Caicos islands (above).

uninhabited cays, making wonderful friends from all over the world. It was during these trips that I began to notice the amazing underwater worlds and creatures I would see while snorkelling. Back home,

thanks to a fourth-grade field trip to a scuba centre that opened nearby, I found out about scuba diving. I didn't realize at the time how much that experience would come to influence my life.

I still remember my first open-water certification dive on the *Supona* in Bimini, in the Bahamas, when I was 10 years old. I was so enthralled with the underwater world and the sunken history held by the ship that I really didn't want the dive to end. I remember slipping below the surface, watching my bubbles trailing upwards, and hearing the sounds fading away as I drifted deeper into this new world. I was never afraid; I felt completely at peace.

Later on, my Mom also got certified. So we searched for a special trip for my 11th birthday. We spent a wonderful seven days aboard the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor* during "Family Week." It was so exciting to meet and dive with other kids my age.

Most of my previous diving had been with people much older than me. Suddenly I felt included in a very special "kids club" of friends who shared my love of scuba. We would dive as



a group with a divemaster who showed us the most wonderful creatures and hidden dive sites. We shared our dive experiences, improved our dive skills, and grew in confidence together. During the week, I made great friendships that have lasted more than a decade later, and I met Davis, who became a best friend for life.

It was also during this week that I had some of my greatest encounters with sharks – a lot of sharks, definitely up close and personal! I loved to watch their behaviour quietly and their tolerance of the divers in their domain. Their reserved power and fearlessness was impressive, but still I felt respect rather than fear. It was a humbling experience and my first insight into my insignificance in this vast ocean.

Several dives off the *Kona Aggressor* come to mind when people ask me about my favourites. It was in Kona that I saw my first humpback whale. I could hear them singing on almost every dive. That was also where I first witnessed an oceanic white-tip shark. Its long pectoral fins, beautiful white tips and impressive power left a lasting impression.

But perhaps the most amazing dive I experienced in Hawaii took place at Garden Eel Cove. We arrived around noon, enjoyed two wonderful dives on the site, and went inside for dinner. By the time we came to the dive deck that evening for the night dive, there were two more boats anchored near to us that had lowered large lights shortly after sunset. As the lights were turned on, the plankton came in.

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It was amazing to be on that black bottom of volcanic sand, waiting. Suddenly, out of the darkness, the mantas appeared – first one, then two, and finally, many more. At the height of the feeding frenzy there were 18 manta rays doing a marine ballet right before my eyes. They performed acrobatic manoeuvres and barrel rolls in an attempt to feast on as much plankton as they possibly could. It was one of the most incredible displays that I had ever seen. Then, as quickly as it began, the mantas were gone, slipping away into the darkness of the ocean. The experience was so compelling, our captain agreed to return to the site the following night. The mantas did not disappoint and another magnificent dive went in my log book.

I continued on, pursuing advanced scuba certification under instructor Wayne Hasson, the co-founder of the *Aggressor Fleet*. He says his greatest passion is passing on his love of the ocean to children. It was great to study and learn from people I had come to consider friends and mentors. We travelled on many more Family Week trips, often with the friends we made on that first trip. It became a much-anticipated ritual, a summer scuba camp that took me to the best diving sites on the planet and taught me about other cultures.

My experiences with diving have helped me grow personally. Recently, I spent an extended time diving in the Cayman Islands and Cayman Brac, studying to become a divemaster and taking a course known as the Science of Diving. My required classes included physics, physiology, decompression theory, the aquatic environment, and diving safety. But my greatest test in leadership came when I guided my first dive.

As a guide on a scuba dive, I was responsible for every diver in my group, serving as their teacher, leader and guardian. It was deeply satisfying when the group, many of them my elders, came back and asked me to guide them on several more dives. They said my guidance and lessons changed how they viewed diving and increased their respect for marine habitats.

Growing up diving has helped direct my life. I am studying to be a marine-conservation biologist, a discipline that is critical in today's world due to an ever-expanding human population. As a conservation biologist, I will address the immediate issue of the accelerating number of endangered marine species resulting from reckless human activity and habitat loss. By doing so, I will confront the larger issue of how human impact and climate change diminish the biological diversity of the oceans.

I'm an undergraduate at the University of Louisville. I have won the Etscorn International Research Scholarship and will be spending the summer interning with Spotted Drum Expeditions and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico. I will be a research diver in the Yucatan peninsula performing marine studies on human involvement with cenotes – a Mexican form of sinkhole – and the biodiversity of artificial reefs.

I am passionate to learn more about the environment that has changed my life. How could I not feel driven to protect the environment and marine species, after all they have shared with me?

I would love to visit Asia. Truk Lagoon fascinates me as a dive site frozen in time, an underwater museum with fighter planes still waiting in their hangers and porcelain dinnerware

waiting to be served. I would consider it a great honor to dive on this site and contemplate the incredible history and sacrifice that happened there.

I would really love to find a research internship in the Pacific for next summer ... if any readers have any ideas!

Scuba has also taught me so many lessons about myself: to take responsibility for my life, to embrace challenges, to step into the unknown, to be humble and loyal, and to be willing to work hard. It made me realize I am responsible for much more than just myself.

A particular incident from many years ago often crosses my mind. I was 10 years old and sitting on the wooden deck of a small sailing ship. The ship was built in the late 1800s, her history and stories eternal. I still hear the creak of the wooden deck and the snapping of the sails; I still taste the salt from the sea spray as she danced with the endless sea.

I can vividly recall the conversation with my dive instructor. I was studying to become a certified scuba diver for the very first time. My instructor asked me what I would wish for, if I could wish for anything.

I told him right away that I wished I could breathe underwater so I would never have to return to the surface. That was many years ago. My wish today remains the same. **AD**

FISH EYES

Coleman feels lucky to have learned at the hands of mentors such as Wayne Hasson, pictured here giving his young charges a tutorial on fish life in the Cayman Islands.

