A taste of marine research

BY STEVE CARR
50 The Newport News

Sev eral coastal high school student teachers and teachers had an experience recently that they won’t soon forget. They took part in a cruise aboard Oregon State University’s research vessel, Oceania. Pictured are: Kama Almasi, left, a teacher at Waldport High School, Etasha Golden, a recent Waldport graduate and a student from North Bend. (Photo courtesy of Tracy Crews)

The Oregon Coast Aquarium will celebrate Sea Otter Awareness Day on Saturday, Oct. 1, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 1. This event celebrates the vital role these threatened animals play in the nearshore ecosys tem, and highlights how the Oregon Coast Aquarium provides top-notch animal care for its four rescued sea otters: Judge, Schuster, Nuka and Oswald. In the wild, sea otters prey on sea urchins, which grow on kelp. Enough urchin grazing can even cut these massive strands of algal forests, which then drift off and die. When sea otters are removed from nearshore populations in check, these key forests—and all the species that depend on them—can suffer. Thus sea otters are a keystone in the kelp forest ecosystem: they keep urchins in check, and the whole food chain can collapse.

An event is an exciting lens through which to see the ecological importance of sea otters along the Pacific coast, as well as demonstrate steps we can take to create a healthier environment for all. Sea otters are a keystone species: they are affected by everything, and everything is affected by them. Come aboard Oceania to experience a hands-on lesson on the fascinating world of sea otters.
"It's an opportunity that very few people even have: to lose you go into marine biology and very, very few high schoolers are ever presented with," DeWitt said. So I think it kind of gave me a glimpse into what you could do with marine biology, and it definitely brought me new perspectives on science that I've never had before.

Leland Wood said, "It was advertised that we were going to help with the research, and that kind of what we expected, like sit back and watch what they were doing and pitch in every now and then, but that really wasn't what happened. On the actual cruise, we were pretty much doing the research right alongside them, doing an active role in their research, helping every step of the way.

HUNDREDS OF DOLPHINS

One of the highlights for Wood was their encounter with dolphins. "We saw several pods of a couple hundred dolphins," he said. "They came up to our boat and actually bow rode with us."

"We were surface-feeding, they weren't even doing for their food because all the plankton was just floating on the top of the water," said Golden. "They would just come up and open up their mouths and take big gulps of it. It was incredible."

Natalie DeWitt said she really had no idea what to expect, but she learned that she had been selected to take part in the trip. "I just hoped that we'd be able to see some marine biology and have a chance to help on a boat and experience it's like to be on a boat."

TAKING PART IN RESEARCH

But the students did more than just observe; they took an active role in the research. "We all took turns being on the top level of the boat, and we just had a lot of fun with them," said DeWitt. "When we saw them we would discuss what the marine biologists were doing, and we would pitch in every now and then."

The students also helped to deploy conductivity, depth, and temperature sensors (CSTDs) used to monitor the ocean conditions.

The R/V Oceanus docked in Portland on Sept. 16 for an open house for the public and Portland-area high school students and educators. The coastal students and teachers helped lead tours of the Oceanus. Researchers gave presentations, and an onboard dinner was held for educators. A BONDING EXPERIENCE

In summing up the trip, Crews said, "It was amazing to bring this group of people together, to have this level of energy and to see them all bond over the few days they were out at sea. And even the crew on the Oceanus, it was contagious, the enthusiasm and the energy."

People interested in learning more about the trip can find information online at the following blog sites:

- Oregon Coast STEM Hub blog at blogs.oregonstate.edu/gemmlab
- Leah Torma's lab at cebi.oregonstate.edu/gemmlab

- Newport High School teacher Kama Almquist blog at kamaalmquist.blogspot.com
- Wallid High School teacher Kara Adamchak blog at education.ascendhigh.org

Wiener Dog Races

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Newport High School senior Leland Wood, front, helps de-

velop a conductivity, depth, and temperature sensors (CSTD) while on a research cruise aboard the R/V Oceanus. (Photos courtesy of Tracy Crews)