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Defending the Deep - Guardians of the Sea

One Team's Journey to Protect Earth's Waters

written by Rebecca L. Farnum
for the Kuwait Dive Team

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The Kuwait Dive Team would also like to thank its partner organisations around the world, with gratitude to all those who work to preserve and protect our oceans and environment.

The Author would like to dedicate this book to Messrs. Elliot Stoller and Khaled Alshawi, without whose tireless efforts to form AMENDS, the American Middle Eastern Network for Dialogue at Stanford, this partnership would not be possible.

And finally, to you the Reader: We hope these stories inspire you to join us in some way, and we thank you for sharing our journey.

Contributor Biographies

Rebecca L. Farnum, *Author*
A passionate advocate for sustainability and justice, Farnum is a doctoral researcher at King's College London studying environmental peacebuilding and activism in the Middle East. Introduced to the work of the Kuwait Dive Team during a conference on U.S.-Middle East relations and social change at Stanford, Farnum now serves as the Team's International Cultural Consultant. Learn more about her work and get in touch through her website, rebeccalfarnum.com.

Kuwait Dive Team, *Producer*
The Kuwait Dive Team commissioned this book to celebrate their three decades of marine conservation, environmental preservation, and volunteering in the Gulf and around the world. Founded informally in 1986 and becoming more active in the wake of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, the Kuwait Dive Team is a volunteer group of young Kuwaitis dedicated to promoting and protecting their country's marine ecosystems. After building some of the world's leading expertise in salvage operations and underwater rescue, the Team has expanded their efforts to include non-divers, involving Kuwaiti society in regular beach clean-ups and environmental campaigns.

Grace C. Young, *Graphic Designer*
An avid SCUBA diver and sailor, Young is graduate student at University of Oxford studying coral reefs. Her background is in Mechanical and Ocean Engineering (B.Sc. MIT 2014), in particular marine robotics and underwater imaging. She is dedicated to exploring better managing the ocean and its fragile resources.

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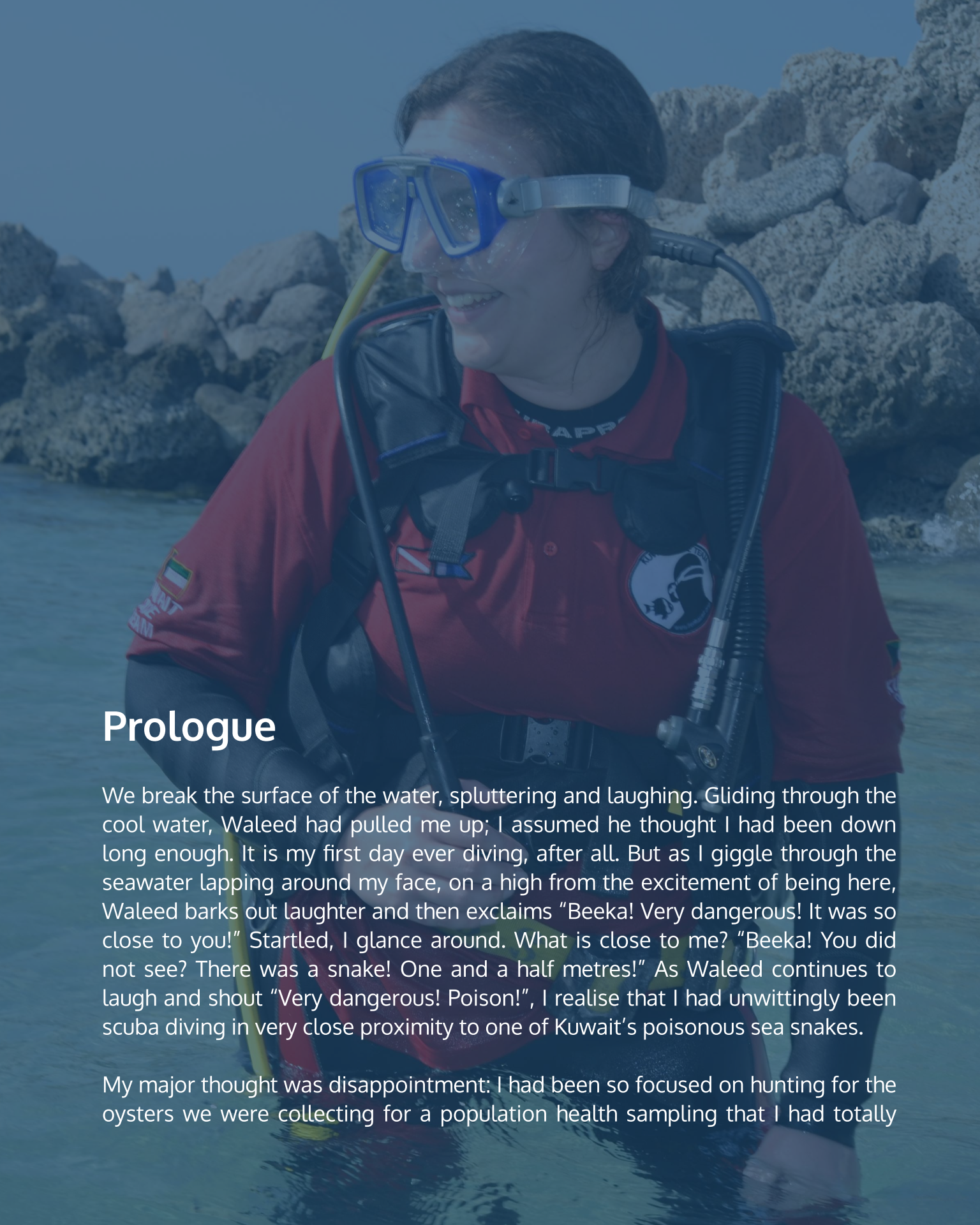
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Join the Kuwait Dive Team



Prologue

We break the surface of the water, spluttering and laughing. Gliding through the cool water, Waleed had pulled me up; I assumed he thought I had been down long enough. It is my first day ever diving, after all. But as I giggle through the seawater lapping around my face, on a high from the excitement of being here, Waleed barks out laughter and then exclaims “Beeka! Very dangerous! It was so close to you!” Startled, I glance around. What is close to me? “Beeka! You did not see? There was a snake! One and a half metres!” As Waleed continues to laugh and shout “Very dangerous! Poison!”, I realise that I had unwittingly been scuba diving in very close proximity to one of Kuwait’s poisonous sea snakes.

My major thought was disappointment: I had been so focused on hunting for the oysters we were collecting for a population health sampling that I had totally

missed the snake. I'm not one to panic when I see a scorpion, spider, or bat. Snakes are one of my favourite animals, having raised a pair of ball pythons from infancy in a high school class. And there I was, with the chance to see a live sea snake up close...and I had missed it. And it was clear that Waleed wasn't going to give me another chance. We swam a good distance away to avoid the venomous creature and went back down. We still had an operation to complete, after all.

In October 2014, I visited the Gulf for the first time. A scholar of environmental conflict and cooperation in the Middle East, I had travelled much of the region and temporarily lived in both Cairo and Jerusalem, but I hadn't made it to the Gulf. My chance came when Dari AlHuwail, International Relations Officer for



Author Becca Farnum in front of the Kuwait skyline.

the Kuwait Dive Team, invited me to visit Kuwait for a week to observe his Team's operations and write a book on their projects for English-speaking audiences. I had met Dari at Stanford University in April 2013, when we were both selected as delegates to the American Middle Eastern Network for Dialogue at Stanford (AMENDS). Dari and I were assigned to the same small group for presentation preparations. As we gave each other feedback on our AMENDS Talks, it became clear that Dari's work with the Kuwait Dive Team was exactly the kind of action I was interested in highlighting through my own academic work exploring environmental cooperation and activism in the Middle East – something often missing from Western media discourses in the midst of our focus on conflict and poor governance in the region.



After successfully helping to salvage a fridge, Becca Farnum holds the victory pose of the Kuwait Dive Team in the water.



Author Becca Farnum helps hoist the Kuwaiti flag on an abandoned oil extraction island raise awareness about the need for proper maintenance.

But there is more – much more – happening across the Middle East than violence, riots, and oppression. There are people making lives for themselves and their communities. Yes, there is hunger in the midst of wealth, greed in the midst of surplus, and tension in the midst of multiculturalism. But there is also love in the midst of hate, action in the midst of apathy, and environmentalism in the midst of overconsumption...as there is in every other part of our broken but beautiful world. The Kuwait Dive Team is an example of one such spark of active environmentalism: A group of volunteers who work tirelessly to protect Kuwait's waters, promote environmental conservation, and educate communities about marine sustainability. This book invites you to come along for their journey.



1

From Predator to Protector: *The Emergence of the Kuwait Dive Team*

Kuwait is a small coastal country on the Arabian Gulf. It is just twice the size of metro London, fewer than 7,000 square miles in total and home to about 4 million people. Today, Kuwait and the Gulf tend to be linked with oil and gas in the Western frame of reference. Certainly, this is true, but the lives of Kuwaitis have been tied to the sea for much longer than the region has been an oil powerhouse. Shipping, pearl diving, and fishing were the cornerstone of Kuwaiti livelihoods for centuries. The ocean that provides a luxurious place for recreation also feeds and clothes much of the population – often quite literally.

The story of the Kuwait Dive Team starts with one such family. As a small boy,





Shipwrecked boats frequently release various kinds of problematic objects and pollutants into the waters. The Kuwait Dive Team monitors big wrecks and salvages when necessary.

Waleed AlFadhel went to the sea with his father, who taught him how to fish, just as his father had taught him. When Waleed was young, he used a hook and line. After throwing the line, he and his father would have to wait for the fish. Waleed has great memories of this time with his father, but once a friend asked him why he bothered to wait for the fish to come to him. The friend explained that you could take a speargun, go diving, and catch the fish. This way, you can go to the fish, catch them anytime, and get a good number.

Waleed dove for the first time in 1983, when he was in his early twenties. The small boy whose father taught him to fish had become a young man whose friend was teaching him to dive. During his first time with a mask and goggles underwater, Waleed found a magical world and after making its acquaintance his life would never be the same. It was a different life, one he had never known. Before diving, he would spend six to ten hours fishing and catch just three or four fish. Diving with a speargun, he could easily collect thirty to forty fish, and got to choose which ones to capture. With a speargun, it became easy to catch big fish. Yet the more time



After the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait and 1990-1991 Gulf War, unexploded ordnances littered Kuwait's waters. The Dive Team works with Kuwait's Navy and Coast Guard to remove them safely.



University Coast in northern Kuwait was a boat yard full of vessels contaminating the coastal environment. The Kuwait Dive Team worked with various authorities on a national project in 2001 to lift 23 marine vessels totalling 383 tons.

Waleed spent underwater, the more he understood the intricate balance of life among the fish. He saw the fish all carrying out their own roles in the coral reef, competing with and benefiting other species to make the reef complete. As a diver, Waleed saw the marine ecosystem in its entirety, allowing him to see that taking so many fish was disturbing the balance. When he realised that what he was doing was wrong, Waleed stopped fishing with the speargun. Knowing that oysters do not live with the coral reefs, he began diving for oysters like his grandfather had. But soon enough, he learned that oysters also have their job in the marine ecosystem, even if they don't live in the corals: Oysters are crucial to filtering seawater and keeping pollutants and particulates controlled. The more Waleed learned, the more he realised that the ocean was precious and something to be preserved rather than preyed upon.

In 1984, Waleed visited the Philippines with some friends. While he was there, he tried to go diving, but he wasn't allowed to – formal diving internationally requires a license. 1985 saw him in Bournemouth, England, training for his dive license. Thanks to his training there, Waleed is now able to dive anywhere in the world. But unlike the majority of the world's licensed scuba enthusiasts, he never dives just for fun. After learning of the damage his fishing was doing to the environment, Waleed made it his mission to work toward protecting the beautiful and delicate balance he sees underwater. Now, he dives to keep the reefs clean, monitor the health of fish, coral, and other populations, and learn

about new ways to better integrate and preserve our society and our planet's ecosystems.

And he's not alone. In 1986, Waleed organised a group for Kuwaitis who love the environment. The Kuwait Dive Team has gone through a lot of change in the past three decades, but the essential vision has stayed the same. In 2010, the Team formed their own official association, registered under the government. The Environmental Voluntary Foundation works in Kuwait to encourage environmentalism, sustainability, and volunteerism in the country. The Kuwait Dive Team is its flagship programme, but the Foundation and the Team have a variety of partners locally and internationally.

Post-Conflict Rebuilding

The Kuwait Dive Team officially began in 1986 as Waleed gathered a group of amateur divers who were committed to protecting the marine environment. But the Team's purpose – and Kuwait's need for such a group of volunteers – was



Dive Team volunteers work at University Coast.



The Dive Team worked to restore the Fat'h Al-Khair Dhow.



Kuwait Dive Team volunteers clean up wire, netting, and other rubbish during a workday.

strongly shaped by the 1990 Invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. Saddam Hussein's forces and the ensuing conflict destroyed much of the small country. The devastation included hundreds of boats sunk throughout the country's marinas and several million barrels of oil dumped in the sea.

In 1991, Kuwait began to rebuild. The process included the mass mobilisation of volunteers. Waleed saw patrols of volunteer firemen monitoring buildings, and realised his group of divers had a niche role to play in Kuwait's redesign. He asked friends in Britain and Egypt about salvaging techniques for sunken boats, and the Team offered their assistance in refloating and removing vessel wrecks. On Christmas Day in 1991, the government officially accepted the offer and the Kuwait Dive Team was formally born. The volunteers got to work making sure that the entire country was cleaned up, not only the parts visible above the water.

The work of rebuilding is not glamorous. It is rather distasteful – for the Kuwait Dive Team, quite literally. Oil spills are not pleasant to be around. Scuba diving in contaminated water means tasting oil seeping through your respirator,

finding yourself surrounded by smelly, foul water with minimal visibility, working directly in the midst of war debris. In their early years, the Kuwait Dive Team met with coils of barbed wire and military equipment. During one particularly harrowing operation, this included an unexploded ordnance. The Team worked with the Kuwaiti Navy for a controlled detonation and clean-up.

In the past twenty-five years, the Team has brought nearly six hundred boats up from the water, along with more than 1,600 tonnes of fishing nets and waste. Their work has saved untold numbers of lives – of fish and marine animals, yes, but also of the Kuwaitis who depend on the sea for their livelihoods and the boaters who without the Team's caring labour would meet with an accident on the sunken boats and rubbish.

Founded in the spirit of a free and independent Kuwait, a small but proud country working to preserve and share its heritage and resources, the Kuwait Dive Team became a patriotic project, encouraging members to show their dedication to their country



Abandoned fishing gear damages coral reefs.



The Dive Team rescues marine creatures from ghostnets.

by giving back and ensuring its continued prosperity through environmental conservation. The Team's website address, freekuwait.org, speaks to this important part of the group's history and identity.

Today's Kuwait bears little physical resemblance to the area so damaged in the early 1990s. But the Kuwait Dive Team remains, its volunteers' motivation never flagging. With the boats sunk by Iraqi forces taken care of, the Team as moved on to education and community beach clean-ups with schoolchildren; the installation and upkeep of mooring buoys and artificial reefs; and the monitoring and care of area reefs and marinas.

Vision and Mission

Central to everything the Team does is its vision and mission. Shared values are what makes the Team and brings the volunteers together. A commitment to the environment, a desire to continually rebuild Kuwait, and a passion for volunteerism are core to who they are. The Kuwait Dive Team seeks to:

- *Put an end to the marine contamination resulting from sunken boats and perform thorough surveys of Kuwait's seabeds;*
- *Expertly train individuals in salvage, rescue, navigation, and underwater work;*
- *Encourage voluntary work for the rebuilding and sustainability of Kuwait.*

The Team believes they have a responsibility for research, education, and activism, and they live up to their standards. While being careful to rely on volunteer work for the operations – and that means working on weekends and evenings, being flexible with availability, and sometimes struggling with resources – the Team is managing to develop an amazing array of projects. Waleed's small group of friends experimenting with boat salvaging to do their part after the war has become a veritable legion of environmentalists working on diverse initiatives, from installing a freshwater lake for migrating birds in a nature reserve to attending community exhibits to demonstrate diving. The projects are chosen very carefully, with a few basic criteria:

- *The Team only takes on projects that no one else can do. There are many ministries and organisations in Kuwait with specific roles working with the sea. But there are gaps in what these various ministries do – and the Kuwait Dive*





In 1998, the Kuwait Dive Team lifted 25 tons of waste iron, fishing nets, and the remains of a wooden ship from Khairan Coast.

Team works to fill those gaps without duplicating others' work.

- *The projects need to align with environmental volunteerism. This means being environmentally focused in nature, of course, but it also means that the work is done as volunteers are able and willing. Throughout the years, the Kuwait Dive Team has been pressured by various people to take on commercial jobs. The Team has steadfastly refused, believing this would compromise the ethos of being a volunteer organisation.*
- *All of the work done by the Team is carefully documented and publicised. This is done to help educate people about the need for marine conservation and to put pressure on the government and corporations to be environmentally responsible.*

Today, only about thirty per cent of what the Team does is actually underwater work. The "Dive" Team has truly expanded to be the Environmental Voluntary Foundation, with a responsibility and dedication to promoting and preserving all of Kuwait's natural beauty for generations to come.


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The Kuwait Dive Team lifts a yacht from Kubbar Island.

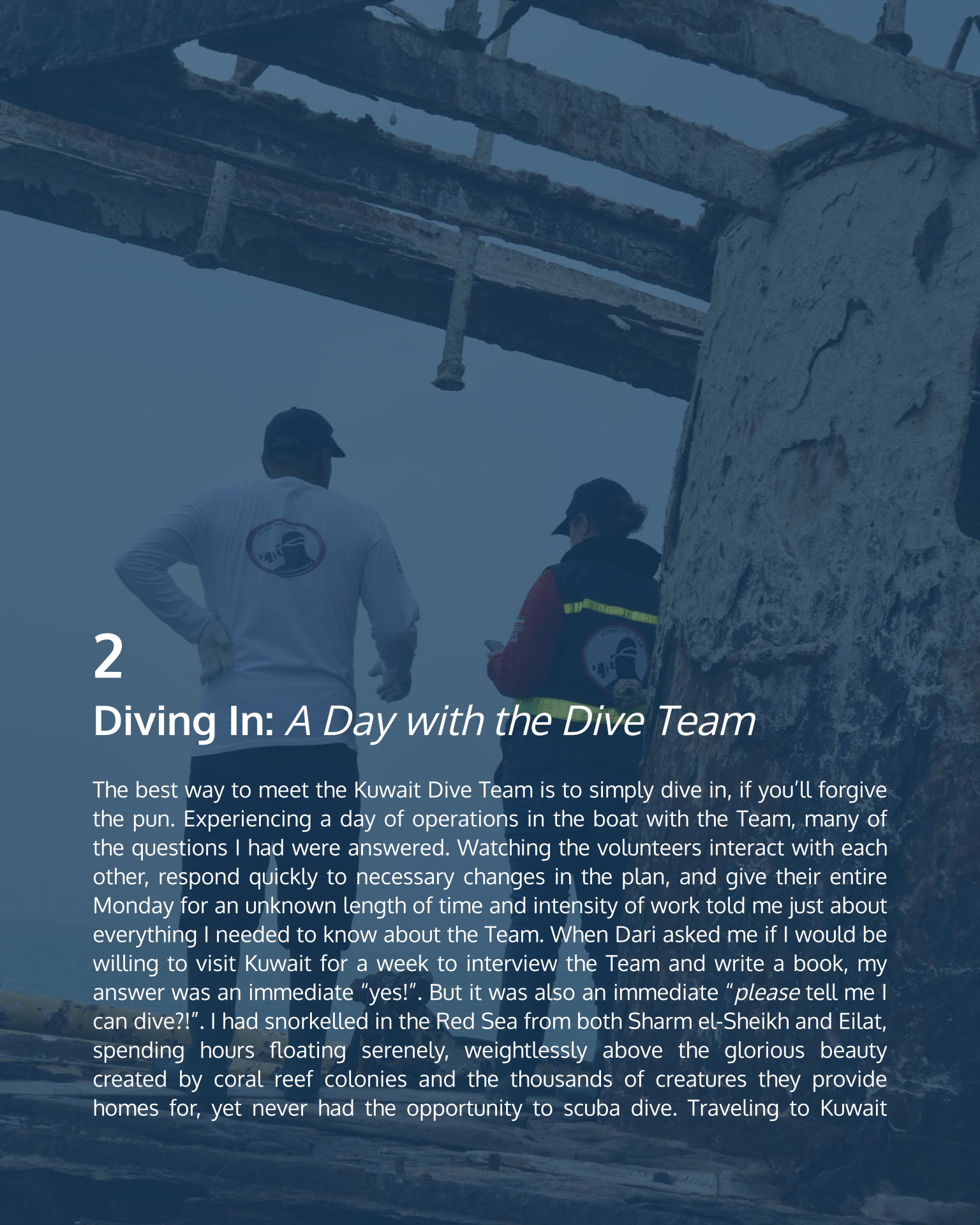


Submerged fishing nets can weigh tons. The Kuwait Dive Team records any net sightings and borrows equipment to deal with the bigger ones they cannot salvage by hand.





Working in coordination with the Kuwait Ports Authority, the Dive Team salvaged the remains of sunken boats and nets from the beachfront fish market in Kuwait's Sharq area. During the large operation, 60 tons of discarded boats and fishing nets were recovered, eliminating some of the pollution sources from Kuwait Bay. Air bags, diving equipment, rubber boats, jet skis, a command boat, and cranes were all necessary for the large operation.



2
Diving In: *A Day with the Dive Team*

The best way to meet the Kuwait Dive Team is to simply dive in, if you'll forgive the pun. Experiencing a day of operations in the boat with the Team, many of the questions I had were answered. Watching the volunteers interact with each other, respond quickly to necessary changes in the plan, and give their entire Monday for an unknown length of time and intensity of work told me just about everything I needed to know about the Team. When Dari asked me if I would be willing to visit Kuwait for a week to interview the Team and write a book, my answer was an immediate "yes!". But it was also an immediate "*please* tell me I can dive?!". I had snorkelled in the Red Sea from both Sharm el-Sheikh and Eilat, spending hours floating serenely, weightlessly above the glorious beauty created by coral reef colonies and the thousands of creatures they provide homes for, yet never had the opportunity to scuba dive. Traveling to Kuwait

explicitly to write a book on a Dive Team, I thought this had to be my opportunity. So I wheedled and begged, and come the morning after my touchdown in Kuwait, I found myself in a car driving toward a marina to participate in a full day of marine operations with the Team.

Monday 27 November 2014

Waleed AlFadhel and Mahmoud Ashkanani pick me up from my hotel. In typical Arab hospitality, I am immediately asked "The room is okay?" "Yes, yes; it's great!" "The hotel is okay?"

And then, of course, the next required question: "Did you sleep okay?" I laugh, and acknowledge I was quite jetlagged, the bed huge, and my sleep quite deep. Waleed laughs and recalls a visit to England. Staying at a Bed & Breakfast, his landlady asked whether he slept well. When he replied "yes", she asked whether he slept "like a log". Waleed and Mahmoud both chuckle at the English idiom. It would not be the last laugh we all had over the absurdities of language.

As we drive toward the marina, I am struck by the strange combination of familiar, stereotypical, and foreign. In a nice car and driving on the right, I could be back in the United States – and it throws me, coming from several years of



Author Becca Farnum underwater during her first scuba experience.

residence in the UK with my brain switched to left side traffic. In the front seat of the car, however, sits Waleed dressed in the traditional white robes and *shmaul* headdress so iconic to the region. The buildings are a mixture of modern skyscrapers that would be at home in New York City and sandy-coloured, simple structures that would not have looked out of place next to the Pyramids of Giza.

After the morning formalities of friendliness, Mahmoud pulls out maps and posters and proceeds to give me a lecture – in a stumbling mixture of Arabic and English with some Latin names thrown in for good measure – about Kuwait's corals. Today, we are traveling to Umm AlMaradim, one of Kuwait's three coral islands. After a forty-minute drive filled with conversation about the corals, the Kuwait Dive Team's operations, and my PhD work, we pull into AlKhiran Resort. The Resort is full of gorgeous beach houses, a park with irrigated, carefully manicured grass and a football pitch, and a marina of luxury boats. To reach the islands, the Kuwait Dive Team has a workboat tied alongside all of the other (recreational) boats. This strange juxtaposition of environmental activism in the midst of luxury consumption is the Team's everyday reality: This is not sustainability and conservation in the midst of 'pristine' nature, but gruelling work all the more important as it happens alongside and calls attention to unsustainable practices.



Team President Waleed AlFadhel explains the day's objectives during the drive to the Team's marina.

Pulling up to the marina, a worker with a large wagon comes to the car and begins unloading the large picnic, provided for us by Team Member Alaa AlGhanim, and piles of equipment to take them to the boat. Waleed and Mahmoud guide me toward the boat, where we're met by three other members of the Team, all male. Climbing aboard, I see a mechanic under the steering column, fiddling with gears and occasionally walking back toward the engines. It's not exactly the most reassuring sight, but luckily I'm not one to worry. Waleed takes the time we're docked at the pier to show me some of the equipment. As one of the guys carries gear over to us, Waleed calls out something in Arabic which causes the whole boat to laugh. I glance at Mahmoud – who chuckles and says "Waleed told him to bring you a pink one". And so, my protests ringing in the air and eyes rolling, the black tank is rolled aside and a pink one brought for my suiting up. I clumsily put together my vest and respirator, struggling to push closed the tight clamp. I practice breathing in with the respirator, and then Waleed and Mahmoud both demonstrate different techniques for clearing a snorkel mask of built-up fog without going above water.

Finally, the mechanic nods his all clear and steps off the boat. Waleed assures me that the boat we are on is a floating boat: Even if it were filled completely with water, its engineering is such that we would not sink. With that, we're off. It is about thirty-five minutes to the island where we'll begin our operations. I assure everyone I do not get seasick, and wonder why they were concerned as we getting going, calmly putt-putting through the marina and around the palatial homes. The guys use the time to gossip, catch up on family news and chat about various things of little consequence. Or, at least, that's what I assume they're talking about, given that I can't understand the majority of their Arabic. Though I studied Arabic for years and gained proficiency whilst living in Cairo, Arabic dialects vary widely between countries, and it's been a few years since I spent a prolonged period of time amongst Arabic speakers.

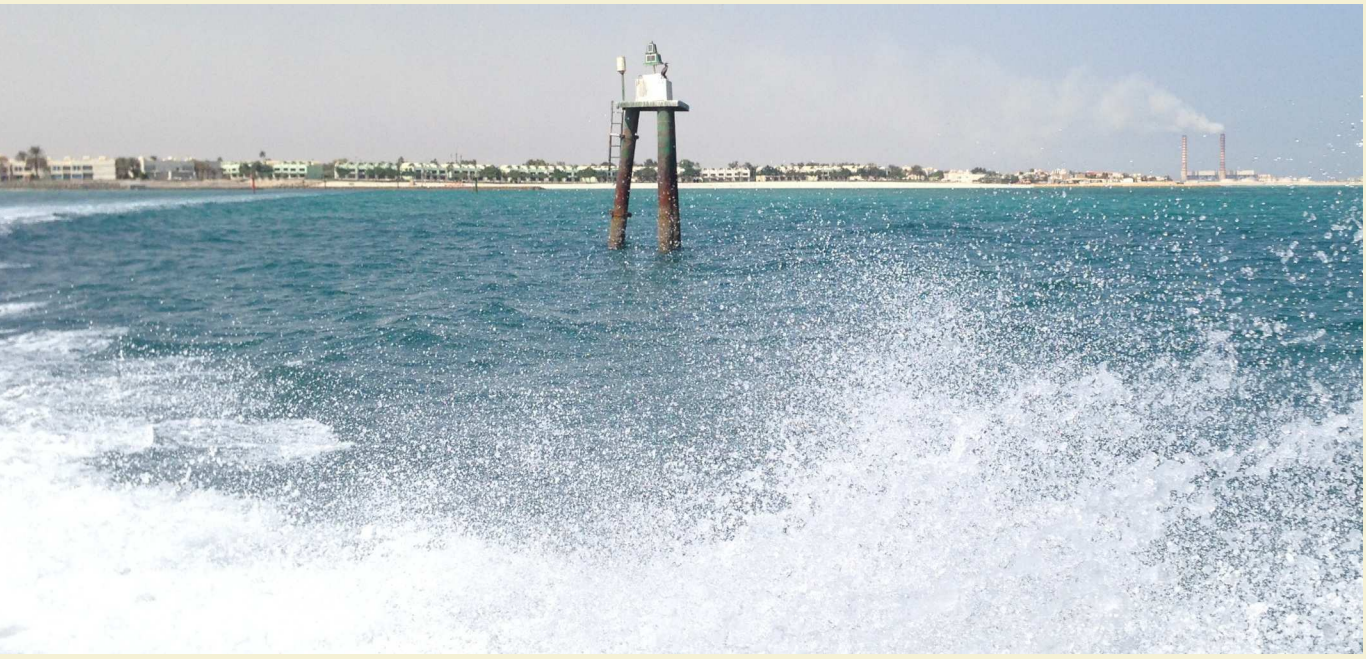
Ten minutes into the ride, I suddenly realise why no one sat at the front of the boat and they had closed the little door – and why they had worried whether I get seasick and given me a very specific seat. I am trying to keep a giddy grin off my face as the boat lurches off the water and crashes back down, splashing up



Kuwait Dive Team volunteers haul an unanchored, unclaimed buoy to a safe location. Large, free floating objects in the sea are dangerous to boats and animals and can serve as a pollution pile-up.

spray above my head and sending water over the protective windows of the boat. There are not the calm waters I played in during childhood summers on small Michigan lakes and bays, with motorboats making the biggest waves on the water, and we aren't here for a calm leisure cruise. It is now that I am starting to understand why Waleed was so worried about conditions, and why it is that wind can be very dangerous to a diver. In the high-rise seat directly to the captain's left, I am protected by two plastic screens from the majority of the overspray, but I am still getting damp and my hair is going absolutely crazy, even though it started the morning in a tight bun. I start to think I may have been better off to veil! We hit a particularly hard wave, and the coffee thermos spills, causing it to drip down the inside middle of the boat, mingling with the salty seawater that has jumped board for a ride. Who wants sugar?

What were clear-cut chalets is now simply the full coastline of Kuwait, barely visible behind us. Ahead of me, Waleed points out the island we are traveling to. Mahmoud is tracking our progress on a Garmin. At first, it seemed rather unnecessary to me: They drive out all the time, it's a tiny area, and you can always see land. But now that we are further out to sea, I begin to understand: You may be able to see land, but you are far away, and the island is much less



The view from the back of a small operations boat during Becca's day with the Dive Team.

clear. If we were to run into trouble, the GPS would be a great help in telling the Coast Guard where we are.

The ride gets even bumpier. For the first time in my life, I understand why and how some people might become seasick on actual trans-Atlantic travel, though I am still grinning widely and loving the ride, reminiscent as it is of riding roller coasters with my father. Apparently the ocean is beaming back: Waleed tells me that local marine lore says “the sea is smiling” when the waves are high enough to have white caps. Mahmoud adds “this means the sea is welcoming you”.

Umm AlMaradim Island is more clearly visible now, golden sandstone buildings emerging out of the waves. It looks entirely unprepossessing, just those few uninhabited buildings alongside ugly rubbish, rigs and a Coast Guard signal tower. From this angle, you would never guess what beauty lies beneath the blue waves currently causing more headache than joy. It is no wonder that Waleed had such a transformative experience the first time he dove. I hold the camera above my head, over the plastic screen of the boat,

trying to get a shot of the excessively ordinary sight ahead. It is really nothing more than an even tinier version of the coastal scape we left thirty minutes ago.

The boat pulls to a stop, idling in the water several metres away from the rocky buffer of the island. The guys start debating in Arabic. A mooring buoy, bobbing bright yellow above the water, is directly in front of us. The Team members grab hold of the rope, tugging to bring the buoy on board. The operation is a careful dance with the captain, Team members, and the sea. Now that the boat has rotated a few degrees, I can see a long string of yellow in front of us, demarcating a section of the sea – and providing places for ships to tie onto, rather than dropping anchors directly on the coral, killing part of the colony and damaging habitats.

Once we're secured to a mooring buoy, the boat is a flurry of activity, Team members' untying and pulling out equipment. Everyone has a role and goes about it, yelling advice and questions back and forth. My role is to change into a wetsuit...no easy feat in front of five Kuwaiti men in the open air whilst trying to maintain some semblance of modesty.

They lower a dinghy off the port (left) side of the boat, a thin blue rope holding it to our boat. Standing up, I realise that while I may not be seasick, that does not mean that I have my sea legs! I'm working with a definite wobble I don't see in the men as I grow accustomed to moving with the sway of the boat. It gets worse as I make my way to the front, but I am starting to catch my balance. They've brought the dinghy out because of the waves: They wouldn't always need to use it to get closer to the island safely, but the weather is a little iffy. Working as volunteers, the Team have to go out when they are available and do what they can. Waiting for good weather is a luxury they simply do not have, with the majority of them working fulltime jobs, completely unrelated to the Dive Team's work. As I watch the dinghy being moved, Waleed explains we cannot fix the lighthouse as we had intended – "We change the plan". Flexibility is crucial for the Team, if they have any chance of getting anything at all done. We left Kuwait City with a list of five operations we hoped to do. As the day goes on, we will do the ones circumstances, particularly the weather, allow us to.

The first operation is one we can do. Every few months, the ropes on the mooring buoys need to be changed to ensure boats continue to use them and none of the equipment disintegrates and causes more problems. One of the Team members pulls out a fresh length of rope, his sharp knife flashing around a bit faster than the Girl Scout camp counsellor in me is comfortable with. They have me tie a new piece of thick rope onto the buoy and toss it back to the sea. And just like that, the first operation is complete! It seems simple, but the expertise to know where the buoys should be placed, how often the ropes needs to be changed, and exactly how to go about it is one the Team has been building for decades.

After strapping me with a knife and showing me how to get it off quickly if I become tangled in a net or other debris while diving, Waleed has me clamber from the boat into the dinghy. We motor away from the boat around the island, Waleed pointing out massive rubbish piles on the beach from people who come to camp but do not take their rubbish back. It's an unpopulated island with no facilities, so things pile up. The Kuwait Dive Team frequently do full-scale beach clean-ups here, trying to keep the coastline clear in order to prevent mass amounts of rubbish from sweeping into the open sea during high tide.

As we pull up to the beach, Waleed says "you will be the first female member of the Dive Team to put her feet in these waters". Our first 'operation' is to introduce me to the coral life of the Gulf. We snorkel around, identifying the various types of coral Mahmoud lectured me on in the car and finding a few different species of fish even in the very shallow waters by the beach. Spotting a large plastic gallon jug, Waleed encourages me to do a snorkel dive for my first salvage operation. It takes me two tries to go down far enough and locate it – kicking flippers in such shallow waters stirs up everything on the surface. Eventually I grab it and triumphantly return to the surface, waving happily at the dinghy driver as Waleed exclaims "her first salvage operation! The first woman, and already!" After a few more minutes spent simply enjoying the beauty of the shallows, we heft ourselves back into the dinghy. Waleed did this much more gracefully than I – making it on his first turn. My weaker upper body strength and lack of practice led to quite a comical routine of the guys pulling as I flailed about trying to get in. I'm sure I rather resembled a fish out of water flopping

around on a dock. Not the most flattering of metaphors but given that I was there to learn about and preserve the marine life, perhaps it was only fair that I feel a certain affinity with them.

We drive around the other side of the small island, and then jump back out of the dinghy and wade onto the beach. We clear a few large pieces of debris that have washed up and are placed dangerously for ships and the tide, and then make our way to the main boat. While we were out snorkelling, the rest of the Team took care of more buoys and tied the boat closer to the island so that we can retrieve the diving equipment from land.

We wade about two feet into the water and suit me up. The tank is heavier than I expected it to be. I'm perhaps even less graceful with it on my back than I was flailing my way into the dinghy. But soon enough, Waleed lets me go underwater with the respirator in and tank on...and I scuba dive for the first time. Now, I am not merely skimming the surface and viewing the coral from several feet up. I get to kick my way down to the coral itself, swimming just inches above the coral.



Author Becca Farnum examines a new wetlands project using treated and naturally filtered wastewater to replenish the Gulf and serve as a haven for migratory birds.



Fishing nets problematically collect rubbish, tangle marine animals, and are an eyesore along Kuwait's coasts. The Kuwait Dive Team monitors and salvages fishing nets. They also run educational initiatives to prevent net dumping.

Waleed warned me that morning that "Never we go to the boat just for fun". The reason why becomes painfully obvious as I survey the damage and rubbish caused by people on boat holidays. Ironically for the Kuwait Dive Team, diving is actually one of the biggest threats to coral. Swimmers who dive for sport and are not properly trained or concerned do a great deal of damage, breaking off pieces of coral for souvenirs or kicking off from the reef without considering the harm they are doing to living animals. This close to the beach near a dock, signs of coral damage are very obvious. I salvage a plastic cup during my first dive, and Waleed makes me come back to the surface for a bittersweet victory photo.

I slowly convince Waleed to let me go further out and deeper down. But already just three metres down, my ears notice and protest the pressure differential. After I have gotten a feel for things and Waleed is comfortable (or at least as comfortable as he is going to be) with my diving, we swim to the ladder and climb back onto the boat. It's time for the next operation.

After a short drive away from the island into open water, I am told we are now about ten minutes from Saudi Arabia. The coastline of both countries is just barely visible. Mahmoud points ahead and says "our grandfathers hunted for oysters here". I am struck by the incredible heritage that is organically created by oral history in a coastal country. Waleed and Mahmoud are doing the same

thing their grandfathers did, in the same place but for very different reasons. Their predecessors dove for oysters as a livelihood, hunting for pearls and food. The Kuwait Dive Team dives for oysters in order to provide a local scientific research centre with samples. The population is being monitored for health after some ten million oysters washed up dead on Kuwait's beaches several months ago and the Dive Team found the cause, a major pollution source.

As we pull up and drop anchor – there aren't corals below us now, just sand that we will not harm much by putting down a traditional anchor – Waleed tells me how to find oysters. Wearing a mask, you have to go all the way down to the sand and look for the oyster-esque lumps. It seems simple enough, but even experienced oyster farmers will occasionally mistake an oyster for a rock and vice versa, given the muck that grows on both and obscures them in the sand. Oyster farming is thus a bit of a feeling game: Oysters will move when you poke them and are not as well anchored as rocks.

As the water is fairly shallow here, we decided to try simple snorkel dives rather than using valuable oxygen. Quite quickly, we realise the area is not as fertile as the Team has expected so we gear up and dive down properly, able to stay longer and cover more ground quickly. For safety and convenience with a novice, we use two regulators from Waleed's tank. This way, I'm getting full oxygen with no problem but don't have to wrestle with so much gear myself. Arm in arm, Waleed and I swim around the sea bottom hunting, our hands skimming the sand and occasionally poking at lumps. When I find an oyster, I give it a careful tug. Up it comes, and into the sample bag it goes.

The research centre has asked for 25-30 oysters for testing. After finding just a handful of oysters in the area, the Team decides to move the boat to a different area that will hopefully produce a greater yield. Before we leave, we have to finish the sampling procedure. Oysters are living creatures, and we want to keep them that way. So we move the creatures from our mesh collection bags to glass jars and sealable bags, filling each container with seawater. We also fill a jar with sand for sampling: Pollutants may be affecting the oysters, and the composition of the sand can help the scientists identify any substances causing problems.

The second place we come to for oyster sampling is very deep. As a brand new, inexperienced diver, I did not dive down and instead snorkel around exploring the water, letting Waleed bring up oysters. The shift is worth it. Within minutes, Waleed has more than we need. The Team takes careful notes of the collection time, latitude and longitude of sampling place, and label all of the containers. And there is Operation 4 complete!

We hoist up the anchor and drive away, making our way very quickly back to the marina now that we are done with operations. Or so we thought. Suddenly, a white speck is visible off the port side. We all shout to the captain, who slows the boat and curves toward it. My initial thoughts of "oh, please be a whale" (the Team had seen some the day before) are quickly replaced with "seriously? Seriously?!" as I realise that what we are looking at is, in fact, a broken fridge free floating. This is incredibly dangerous for ships. Unmarked and unlit, it is a crash hazard. Rusting away, it is polluting the water and releasing potentially fatal toxins. If it fills with water in the wrong way and sinks, it creates a potential problem for coral and other life as it crashes on the bottom and continues to erode.

The captain carefully pulls up as close to the fridge as he can. Waleed and I jump into the water. The guys still aboard toss thick ropes out to us, which we wrap around the fridge. The other volunteers haul upward while Waleed and I push from the water. While the others secure the fridge in the front of the boat, Waleed and I climb back in to survey our handiwork. Waleed calls to all of us: "Just two hundred dinar [Kuwaiti currency, nearly $700], and it will be good as new!" We all laugh, relieved and amused. The Emergency Operation is complete.

On the way back, Waleed uses the back of the boat to pray on a rug rolled out especially for that purpose. I rinse off my hands and face with the fresh water hose immediately to his right and make my way back up to the front of the boat, trying not to disturb him. The sea is a bit calmer now (not 'laughing' with its white peaks), and perhaps I've earned a little bit of respect, because now I'm allowed to sit on the side of the boat toward the front, jostling and bouncing with the waves and feeling the glorious wind on my face.



Author Becca Farnum helps replace a fraying rope on a mooring buoy. The Dive Team regularly performs basic maintenance on buoys and markers around the Kuwaiti Gulf to ensure safety and avoid pollution problems.

On my left is the main Kuwaiti coastline. A giant mountain of sand, dug up during the resort construction, forms a striking skyline. It's not precisely the Pyramids of Giza, but it is strangely beautiful in its own way against the setting sun.

Coming back into the marina, we realise we are *still* not yet done with operations for the day. Several days ago, the Team found a huge lantern buoy floating, unmoored, unlabelled, and serving no apparent purpose. The buoy was at least as dangerous as the fridge, so they pulled it in and tied it to the marina dock. But the marina manager has told them they need to clear it. So our last activity for the volunteers' day is to tie the buoy to the boat, carefully drive it to another part of the dock, and pull it onto a boat launch. As we drive away from the luxury boats, Waleed and I jump on the buoy and climb up the ladder a bit for a fun photo. Coming around a curve, we see a truck with a crane that the Team has commissioned for this purpose backing into the launch. A few of the guys and I jump out of the boat, grab onto the ropes we have tied to the buoy, and haul it up out of the water. We then tie it to another truck, drag it a bit further up the launch, and secure it to the crane mechanism. The operator pulls the buoy up, with contradicting advice and directions shouted at him in stereo as marina workers and Dive Team volunteers surround us for the action. Finally, the buoy is safely stowed in the truck. The Team will take it to one of their father's



The Kuwait Dive Team finds all kinds of rubbish in the water. Balloons can kill marine life - or give Becca some salvaging practice!

gardens and store it temporarily. They'll place an ad with a photo in the newspapers to allow companies to claim it, though it isn't likely anyone will. The buoy may have even floated over from Saudi Arabia.

From there, we dock the boat properly and call it a day. I head into the locker room and come out after what I think is a fairly quick shower and change, but of course, there are Waleed and Mahmoud already, looking much fresher and more put together than I do. I choose to blame it on my hair.

Driving back in, the guys chat in Arabic as I frantically type notes, WhatsApp a few mates about how cool my day was, and stare out the windows at the gorgeous sites. As we arrive at the hotel, Waleed admits that he was nervous about taking me on their smaller 24-foot boat on Wednesday for some other operations, but after my performance today, he is no longer worried and I definitely get to go see Kuwait Bay. "After all," Waleed tells me, "you are a daughter of the sea".



3

The Science of Beauty: *Kuwait's Corals and Marine Life*

It is tempting to simply fill the entirety of these pages with photographs of the colourful coral and fish one sees underwater in the Gulf. But to do so would be an insult to the incredible dedication and purposefully honed expertise of the Team that works so hard to ensure this beauty has flourished.

Meet Mahmoud Ashkanani, the Kuwait Dive Team's amateur scientist. Mahmoud may protest the title, assuring me "We are not scientists". He means that he is not formally trained in marine science and does not hold a doctorate. But anyone who spends five minutes with Mahmoud will quickly come to see that

the man is most certainly a scientist by nature, constantly seeking out new information, meticulously noting everything down, and constantly experimenting with various new techniques.

Like Waleed, Mahmoud Ashkanani was a fisherman who had a transformative experience on his first dive.

Mahmoud's relationship with the sea began when he was seven years, when he started swimming to catch fish and forage the beach during low tides. At the age of twelve, he began fishing with a net from the beach – but he caught too much and ended up throwing half of his take away. As a young adult, Mahmoud was able to fish from a boat and, in 1983, began visiting Kuwait's islands, where he began snorkelling. Mahmoud loved the beauty offered by snorkelling, but hated the pressure and buoyancy issues as soon as he swam too far down. His negative experiences caused him to dismiss the idea of taking diving lessons.

Happily for the Kuwait Dive Team, Mahmoud's friends did not give up so easily. A year after he began snorkelling on the surface, he confessed to his hatred for painful ears when asked about why he was not a diver. The questioner insisted that he try again, teaching him the trick of blowing your nose to relieve pressure. That day, Mahmoud made it three metres down and properly saw and fell in love with the world of the corals. Finally, Mahmoud took proper diving lessons and got licensed. During his first time in open water as a licensed diver swimming along amongst the coral near Kubbar Island, he saw a shadow. Glancing around him, Mahmoud found himself near a whale shark. Mahmoud swam with that shark for half an hour that day, marvelling in the mysteries of the ocean and entranced by the creature's majestic beauty. Finally tearing himself away, Mahmoud resolved to take his camera the next time he went underwater. He got a protective case so he could use the camera while diving and went back out as soon as he got the chance.

Mahmoud never saw his shark friend again, but he remained passionate about recording his dives. Still a fisherman, he worked for a while with a speargun before deciding, like Waleed had, that it simply was not the right job for him. After reading about the work of the Kuwait Dive Team in the newspaper in 1996,



A huge part of the Kuwait Dive Team's time is spent in education and advocacy. Here, President Waleed AlFadhel shares information about one of the Team's operations with the Kuwaiti press.

Mahmoud sought them out and asked to be a part. His first work with the Team involved working to salvage and float boats...and Mahmoud quickly realised that while the Team knew what they needed to do, *how* to perform all the operations was not so clear. A scientist was born. Mahmoud began experimenting with various techniques and equipment, working out the best way to salvage, farm artificial reefs, and record the Team's progress as he went.

Before Mahmoud began diving, he had no idea about the reefs and fish. He saw no real purpose to the environment and viewed the sea as a place to throw rubbish without consequence. Diving, Mahmoud saw that the reefs always looked incredibly unhealthy after a weekend, with rubbish from holiday celebrations sitting on the ocean floor and damaging the coral. A relationship and concern between Mahmoud and the marine environment grew, and he became entirely fascinated by the reefs themselves. He read everything he could get his hands on. Mahmoud began taking copious notes and photos of everything he saw and did with the Team and while diving. Whenever he came across a new kind of fish or coral, he would look it up. Whenever an idea came

to him for a salvage technique, he would go out and experiment to see if the Team could use his idea to improve operations.

And it shows. Driving toward the marina to take part in the Team's operations, I am treated to a lecture on the corals and fish of Kuwait's waters from Mahmoud. There are three coral islands in Kuwaiti waters, one emerging very recently, pushed up from the sea as the coral has grown. Twenty-one places throughout Kuwait have been 'farmed' with artificial reef. Most of them are 20-35 metres below the water.

Under Mahmoud's leadership, the Team produces educational materials about Kuwait's marine resources. They make posters and brochures highlighting the coral islands and spotlighting some of the kinds of fish and corals people might see while diving. Interactive flashcards and educational colouring packets have been developed for children. I benefit from these myself, practicing my Arabic translations and beginning to learn the Latin names for various species.

Coral Bleaching

"In Kuwait, many people think it's rock, not alive", Mahmoud tells me, stressing that coral are living animals – tiny invertebrates that live in colonies and are dependent on their ecosystems to survive, just as we are. There are some six hundred types of hard coral in the world; Kuwait is home to thirty-five of them. Most coral thrive at 20-26 degrees Celsius and cannot tolerate temperatures below 18. Kuwait's water, averaging around 25 degrees, is on the hot end of the tolerable spectrum, making the Gulf's corals particularly susceptible to temperature fluctuations. Mahmoud has experienced devastation in the form of coral bleaching as a result of temperature changes. During Ramadan 2011, Mahmoud did not dive. It is hard work at the best of times; doing so while fasting during the hottest month of the year is generally asking for trouble. The Team does not completely halt operations during the Islamic holy month, but things do quiet down. Mahmoud dived just before Ramadan and found the coral all healthy and thriving. One month later, on a project to farm some of the coral, he found the coral dead.

The actual coral part of reefs are a fairly colourless white-grey. The vibrancy



Coral bleaching occurs when changes in temperature or nutrients make it difficult for algae to grow. Here, a Kuwait Dive Team Volunteer records the unhealthy paleness of this part of the reef.



It isn't just the coral reefs whose color should be healthy! Encountering a sea turtle during a coral monitoring survey is a good sign that the habitat is doing well.



In addition to clearing rubbish and educating the public about marine conservation, the Kuwait Dive Team carefully documents marine life and ocean health.

seen in the habitats is thanks to various forms of algae that live symbiotically with the corals. The algae are photosynthetic plants that grow on the coral animals, providing the coral with nutrients as they produce their own. When the algae die from temperature intolerance, a lack of sunlight, or pollutants, the coral appear white once more and, without the nutrients fed them by algae, starve. This process is called "coral bleaching" and is devastating not only to the algae and coral, but also to the fish that depend on the reef for their home and the global ecosystem as a whole.

Recording and Monitoring

Mahmoud is responsible for the official record during operations. The Team carefully notes all of their work. This is helpful for publicity and education, but it is also necessary for accountability and follow-up. Taking note of where rubbish is found can help change policies and enforce rules for dumping. When the Team finds a sunken boat, net, or other rubbish during a survey operation, Mahmoud is responsible for GPS and



The Team performs thorough surveys of Kuwait's seabeds.

mapping, noting where the item is and securing it in place if necessary so that Team can return for clean-up.

In 2006, Mahmoud's daughter studied for a master's degree in microbiology focused on coral. Mahmoud assisted with her study, counting coral and growing his own knowledge on their scientific classification. Thanks to that study and Mahmoud's 100+ dives a year, he is able to track the population density of Kuwait's corals. In order to help monitor climate change and temperature fluctuations, the Kuwait Dive Team now regularly collects data on reef colour and sends their results it to CoralWatch, an initiative of the University of Queensland in Australia collating information on coral reef health around the world.



The Kuwait Dive Team regularly removes discarded fishing nets that pose a danger to marine life.

Scientific Sampling: The Mystery of Ten Million Oysters

A few years ago, Kuwait woke up to ten million oysters washed up dead on its shores. The sight created quite the media stir, with striking photography and popular curiosity, about what on earth had happened. Scientists came to try and figure out the cause.

A massive storm had thrown the oysters to the beach, which explained the mass number on shore. But the cause of death was more difficult to determine. The government initially blamed people opening the oysters for pearls, pointing to the open shells as a proof.

But the Kuwait Dive Team knows oysters. Waleed has worked with them for nearly four decades; Mahmoud has fifteen years of experience. They knew that



One morning, Kuwait woke up to millions of dead oysters on their shores. The Kuwait Dive Team discovered the contaminant source and now works with a local scientific centre to monitor and restore the oyster population.

the quantity of oysters found could not be simply explained by a handful of pearl hunters discarding the odd oyster after prying it open underwater.

The Team decided to carry out their own investigations. Diving at locations they knew to be rich oyster fields, the Team saw oysters covered in sand. To the inexperienced, that sentence means nothing. Those who dive for oysters know that the molluscs live on the seabed or tidal shores, their shells coated with barnacles but hardly buried completely in the sand. Exploring further, the Team found a construction site near the beach with a pipeline dumping into the sea.

The Team reported their findings to the authorities, who initially scoffed at the idea that any new building was the cause. After a year of tests, a research centre concluded that the Team was correct. Today, the Kuwait Dive Team continues to

collect samples of oysters for the scientists to study in order to ensure that the population is restoring. I had the chance to join the Team for one of these sampling operations when I visited. Waleed and I dove to collect oysters while Mahmoud carefully supervised the scientific process. Under Mahmoud's direction, the Team has learned enough about research techniques to collect sand from both places we sampled, to note the latitude and longitude of our sites and the time of collection, and carefully label all of the sample bags.

Developing Techniques: Trial and Error

Today, there are many salvage teams in the world but the Kuwait Dive Team was one of the first, and the Team continues to pioneer many kinds of salvage operations, coral management processes, and marine educational activities. The Team constantly reviews its operations and techniques, asking other Teams



around the world for advice, testing their own ideas, and experimenting with novel procedures. Mahmoud, scientist that he is, is behind most of these innovations.

Volunteers regularly salvage fishing nets. This is dangerous work: The nets are generally entangled on the reefs, requiring volunteers to carefully cut them free without cutting themselves or further damaging the corals. Fish and even sharks easily become trapped in submerged nets, scared and likely to lash out at volunteers working to release them. And once a net is underwater for more than a day, they become very heavy, completely saturated with water and covered in algae growth. Given their immense weight and propensity for becoming re-entangled in the coral, these nets are incredibly challenging to lift. Until, late one night, looking at a plastic bag from the supermarket, Mahmoud had an idea.



The Kuwait Dive Team visits other coral reefs, like this vibrant habitat in the Maldives, to practice their monitoring and documentation techniques. These trips also give them ideas for additional projects to carry out in Kuwait.





After discovering how plastic bags could be filled underwater, the Team invested in stronger, reusable bags. Parachutes are one of the Team's many techniques in rubbish-lifting operations.

He filled the bag with water and saw that it held. Might it work in reverse? With some trial and error, Mahmoud discovered that divers could carry some plastic bags and string down to a sunken net in their vests, tie a bag to each corner of the net, and fill the bag with air from their oxygen tank using their second regulator. These homemade underwater 'airbags' have now been perfected by the Team and are critical in their salvage operations.

The team also experiments with coral 'farming', transplanting sections of coral between reefs and starting artificial reef colonies around Kuwaiti waters. The Team's most ambitious coral farming project, nearly two acres of artificial reef area, opened in October 2003. The "Jaber Al-Kuwait Reefs" are dedicated to and named for His Highness the Former Emir in gratitude for his support of the Team's projects. But they also stand as a testament to Mahmoud's skills and the Team's commitment to research and expertise. Coral reefs are complex systems. Creating them artificially is a massive undertaking, not to be begun lightly or without due consideration to long-term effects. Mahmoud and his





In October 2003, the Kuwait Dive Team placed nearly two acres of artificial reef. In the Jaber Al-Kuwait Reefs, marine ecosystems are given a chance to thrive.

team test various structures to determine which materials, treatments, and shapes are the best hosts for corals and their symbiotic algae and fish. Kuwait Dive Team volunteers spend hours training in artificial reef construction and placement at home and abroad. The result is an unparalleled ability to create new habitats for coral reefs in the Gulf, the know-how to maintain them, and the capacity to educate tourist divers about their preservation.

The Knowledge of Life and Death: The Great Turtle Rescue

The work of the Kuwait Dive Team is saving lives. Those of the corals and fish and oysters irreversibly harmed everyday by human action, but also those of the people whose livelihoods and health are threatened by the deterioration of our planet's delicate ecosystem.

Usually, the life-saving element of the Team's voluntary work is a bit removed from their immediate actions. But every once in a while, it is immediately apparent and volunteers literally hold another being's life in their hands.



Watching majestic animals like this sea turtle swim free is a major motivation for the Team's work.



Team members work to free entangled sharks.

This is perhaps most often felt by the Team in their encounters with one of the ocean's most charismatic creatures: the sea turtle.

The lifecycle of turtles involves development in untended eggs buried and left by the mother, hatching on the beach, and a race to make it to the relative security of the water. Turtles instinctively make their way to the sea as soon as they emerge from their shells, but predatory birds, crabs, and even insects on their journey catch many of the infants. Human intervention causes even more problems, as the hatchlings run into beach chairs, bonfire pits, rubbish, and the like. In September 1999, Kuwait Dive Team volunteers oversaw a hatching and the infants' subsequent marathon, standing guard during the night-time hatching and assisting with minimal intervention.

But the Team's most dramatic encounter occurred a few years prior. One spring day in 1996, the maintenance crew at the Shuaiba Power Station located to the south of Kuwait City discovered two sea turtles in their plant. The turtles had somehow entered through the screen that filtered seawater into an intake pool used by the station's cooling system. The maintenance workers' call for help made its way to the Kuwait Dive Team.

The Team was initially sceptical. KDT volunteers are careful to only take on operations they know they can complete. They did not have this expertise. None of them had experience in this kind of rescue. But passionate environmentalists that they are, and always keen to gain new knowledge, they sent a carefully worded appeal online:

> ***URGENT – SAVE A TURTLE***
> *We recently discovered a pair of sea turtles stuck in a pool, part of a power station located by the sea-side. We would greatly appreciate your input on the best way to retrieve and safely transport these turtles to open waters. We will attempt to free them on Thursday, April 25th. The pool's water contains a high level of chlorine. The two turtles have been there for about five days.*

Abdullah's message received global attention. The Team's phones were soon ringing off the hook with advice as well as concern and support. Ideas came from Canada, the United States, and even Malaysia. The volunteers carefully collected all of the suggestions and considered each one. They learned that the protective plastron surface of the turtles' stomach could not be scraped. They noted that the animals would have to remain wet and cool at all times: Body temperatures above 30 degrees Celsius would be lethal, but lengthy submersion would also result in death.

The Team drove out to Shuaiba to perform a Site Inspection and liaise with the power station's maintenance crew. Misgivings over the likelihood of success were inflated as the visit reinforced the task's difficulty. The Team asked the power station to stop chlorinating the water until the turtles were out safely. "We can do that only for a maximum of twelve hours. The cost beyond that

would be unthinkable", came the reply. "Can you turn off the six water pumps? The force of the water surge will be dangerous to would-be rescuers." "Sorry. The water pumps feed the station's essential cooling system and the power station can't be switched off. It serves Shuaiba's vital local industries. It's not an option." The murky water made it difficult to see the turtles until they broke the surface to breathe. Floating debris and a bottom layer of sediment posed further threats to the turtles and any divers who would enter the pool.

In spite of the difficulties, the Team was willing to try, bolstered by assurances of every support possible from various organisations and the power station as well as continued consulting with knowledgeable individuals online. Volunteers spent hours at the Kuwait Dive Team's headquarters, planning for the operation with a list of the equipment required and assigning specific duties to Team members.

At 7am on Thursday 25 April 1996, the twenty-six involved team members began work. Boats were carefully lowered into the pool, taking care to move





After receiving a call from Shuaiba Power Plant about two sea turtles stranded in their pool, the Kuwait Dive Team carefully planned their first major rescue and transporation operation. Working with staff at the power station to ensure volunteer safety while maintaining power production, and seeking advice from around the world regarding turtle health and care, the Kuwait Dive Team was able to successfully capture and release two of the ocean's most charismatic creatures.

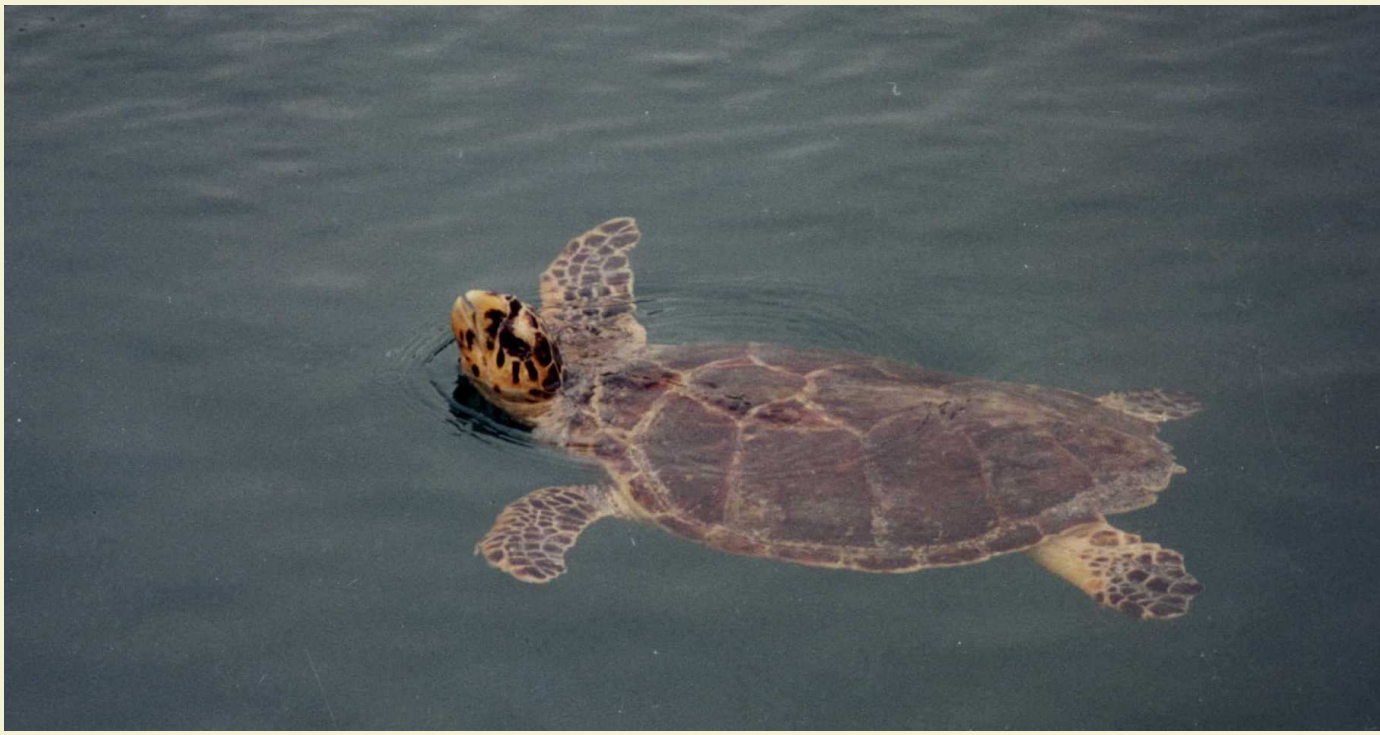












During their 1996 rescue operation in Shuaiba Power Plant, the Kuwait Dive Team successfully released two sea turtles back into open waters. Today, they regularly free turtles and other marine animals caught in abandoned fishing nets.

slowly so as not to frighten the turtles. The Team had decided against trying to dive for the turtles: The strong current and murky waters meant divers would have limited manoeuvrability and be unlikely to see the turtles well enough to interact without harming them. And so the pool's surface debris was meticulously cleared and nets set in place, the Team hoping to capture the animals when they broke the surface for breath – a window lasting only a few seconds.

As the clocked ticked on and volunteers struggled to maintain their position, holding the heavy nets against the forces of wind and current, photographers and curious observers lined the pool walls. Swift strikes with the net whenever one of the turtles came up were repeatedly met with failure. Cheering broke out over an apparent success, only to turn to disappointed moans as the turtle dived yet again and the net floated free. Torn holes in the net were adjusted;



Unmonitored and abandoned fishing nets are dangerous for everyone and everything in the sea. Not every captured creature can be rescued by the Kuwait Dive Team.




Rescuing two turtles from the Shuaiba Power Station was a complicated operation for the Team.

the boat engines were turned off in an attempt to encourage the turtles to surface. Sweat streamed as hours passed.

Finally, at 3:30pm, one of the turtles became completely entangled in the net. Shouted instructions rang in the air as volunteers frantically tugged ropes, hauled in the net, and steadied boats and the photographers flashed cameras and clicked shutters. Four men hefted the creature measuring nearly two metres long into a waiting boat. The entire boat, specially prepard with cool, damp padding, was lifted by crane into a pickup truck. The truck sped seven kilometres south on the highway with its precious cargo. At the Mina Abdullah Beach, Team volunteers carefully took the beautiful creature to damp sand at the water's edge. Spectators applauded as children posed for photographers. The turtle, unruffled by the day's events to all outward appearances, placidly moved forward, huge flippers digging into the sand to thrust himself toward the sea.

Back at the pool, the marathon continued as the smaller turtle continually evaded the volunteers. Frustrated with the creature's seemingly never-ending ability to find the increasing number of holes in the net, a new net was laboriously brought in. Two and a half hours after the larger turtle was caught, the crowd once again roared in approval as the second turtle was hauled to safety. The smaller animal made its way down the same highway to the same beach, where a large crowd had gathered in anticipation of his arrival.

As the exhausted but triumphant volunteers made their way back to Team Headquarters, Abdullah gratefully posted online once more:



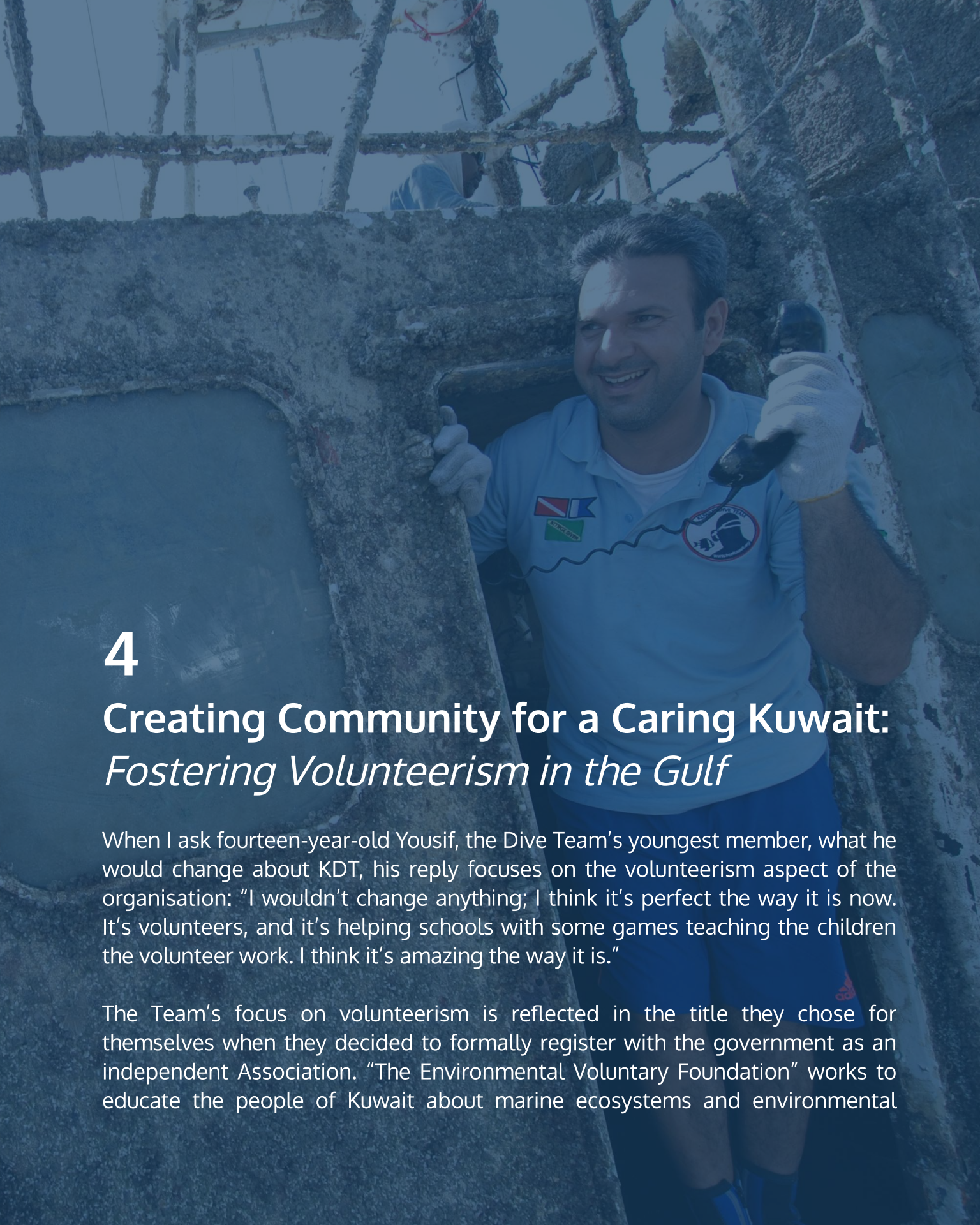
The Kuwait Dive Team doesn't only survey and rescue under the water. Aerial photography with drones like this help monitor the overall health of the Gulf. Regular monitoring helps the Team know when new construction projects, storms, or accidents require their attention.

We just got back from completing the rescue, the turtles are now home free, deep in the beautiful blue sea of Kuwait. The Team and I would like to personally thank everyone who e-mailed us advice on how to deal with this situation. May we repeat, all the advice was very valuable to us. The big turtle was 1.7m long and 79cm wide and very heavy though we did not weigh it. We did not measure the little turtle as it seemed anxious for its freedom, therefore, we rushed it to the open waters before sunset.

Again, many, many, thanks to everyone for responding to our plea. Our hearts go out to everyone.

Four years later, another turtle was sucked into the power station's pool via its twenty-one metre pipe. Now more experienced and slightly more sure of success, twenty-five volunteers spent most of their Saturday one weekend in March 2000 to capture and release the creature, allowing it to follow the footsteps of the 1996 animals. Today, the Kuwait Dive Team works with the government and corporations to encourage them to cover any pipelines so that large debris cannot travel into the open sea and sea creatures will no longer find themselves in dangerous areas.

Every day with the Kuwait Dive Team brings new challenges and opportunities for gaining knowledge. The volunteers are required to think and plan as rigorously as a laboratory pharmacist. But though he may have a powerful scientific mind and the capacity for it, Mahmoud is insistent that he is no academic. He actually lives this, and it's about more than books. Yet, if PhDs were earned through experience, Mahmoud and many of the Team's volunteers would have their degrees ten times over.



4

Creating Community for a Caring Kuwait: *Fostering Volunteerism in the Gulf*

When I ask fourteen-year-old Yousif, the Dive Team's youngest member, what he would change about KDT, his reply focuses on the volunteerism aspect of the organisation: "I wouldn't change anything; I think it's perfect the way it is now. It's volunteers, and it's helping schools with some games teaching the children the volunteer work. I think it's amazing the way it is."

The Team's focus on volunteerism is reflected in the title they chose for themselves when they decided to formally register with the government as an independent Association. "The Environmental Voluntary Foundation" works to educate the people of Kuwait about marine ecosystems and environmental

conservation with at least as much emphasis placed on the importance and value of volunteering.

This ethos can be traced to the 1990 Invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi forces. During the Invasion, most Kuwaitis did not go to work or school, refusing to participate in the institutions now controlled by Saddam Hussein's government. At the time, Waleed AlFadhel was a manager in the Office of Islamic Affairs. Using the contacts he had developed during his time in the ministry, Waleed helped develop a volunteers' group. Though Kuwaitis were boycotting the government, they needed to keep their society running as much as possible. A parallel set of institutions emerged, a grassroots organisation overseeing professionals-turned-temporary-volunteers to assist in the ongoing war effort and keep the country as stable as possible.



The Kuwait Dive Team's Mobile Beach Clean-Up Unit is one of its expansion efforts to include all of Kuwait's communities in marine conservation. Through Beach Cleanups, non-divers - students and corporate workers, kids and adults, men and women alike - can help protect life under the sea.

After the war ended, nationalism fed a willingness to volunteer with fire patrols and other rebuilding projects as Kuwaitis reclaimed their country. Rubble was quickly cleared, homes rebuilt, and schools reopened. Work progressed relatively quickly, fuelled by the desire of the people to return to their pre-war lives.

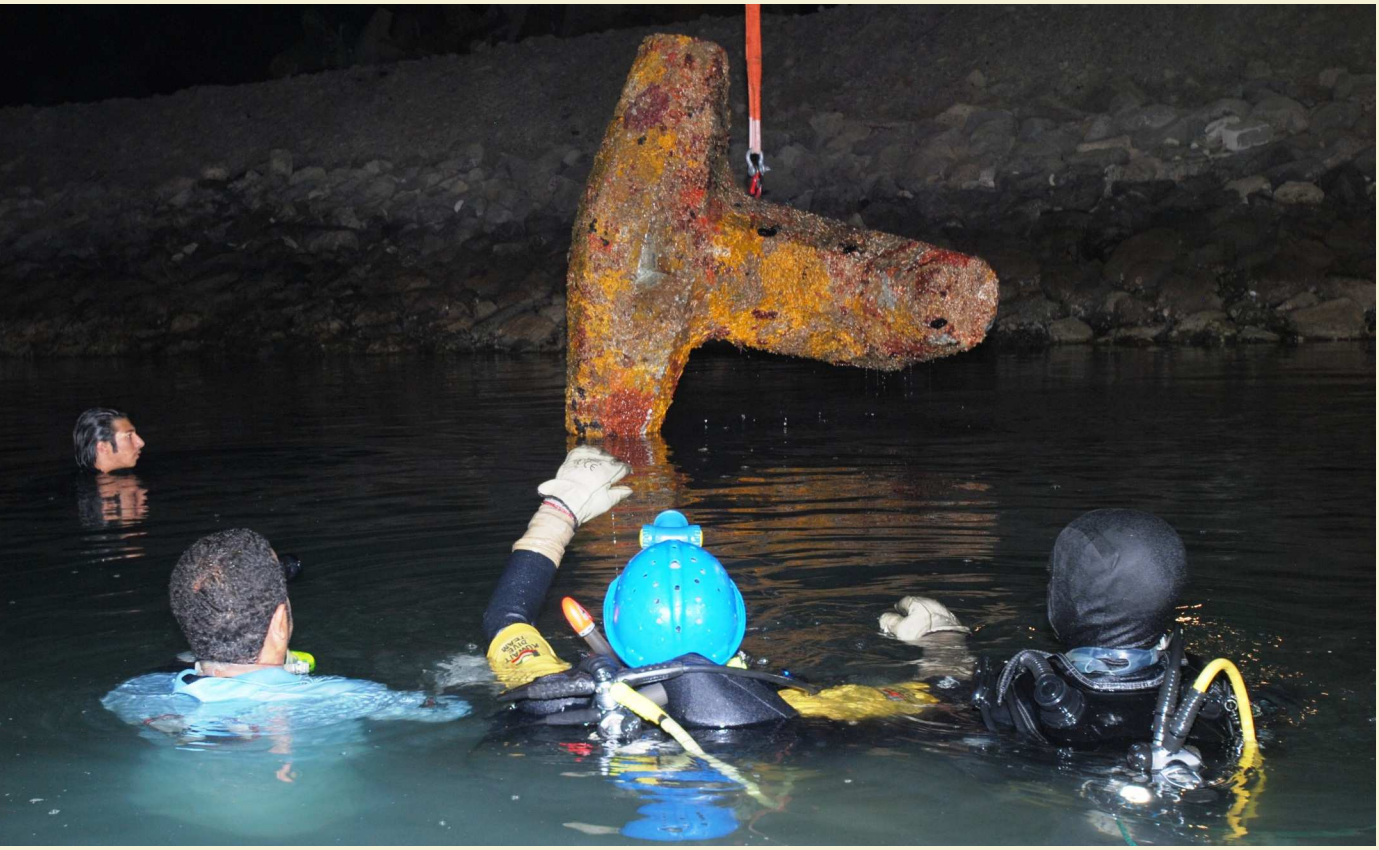
Today, there is little evidence of the devastation from two decades ago. Unfortunately, though, there is also little remaining of the spirit of volunteerism fed by the invasion. The Kuwait Dive Team is trying to change that.

"Volunteer Junkies": Noura AlSanousi and Dari AlHuwail

Many members of the Dive Team find the organisation and become interested because they love diving. But others enter through the volunteering route.



Divers celebrate after successfully lifting a sunken tug boat.



The Dive Team remove hazardous wavebreakers from AlFintas.

Noura AlSanousi is the Leader of the Dive Team's Mobile Beach Clean-Up Unit. She also runs "The Basket", an initiative to help form relationships and redistribute wealth in Kuwait. During Ramadan, Noura takes meals to the petrol stations in Khiran to support the workers.

Noura used to do paid work but she found it immensely unsatisfying. Luckily for her, she does not currently need to do work for pay, so she is able to spend her time doing what really drives her: volunteering. I ask her if she sees a connection between teaching students on the beach and marine animals and distributing food to needy families. For her, it's the volunteering that connects her activities. She speaks to the sense of fulfilment from using her time this way, telling me that now when she goes home, "I feel like I've done something". I ask if she would take paid work doing this kind of job. The look on her face says "no" very clearly, as she tries to find the words to explain that it somehow does not matter what she is doing – if she is being paid for the work, it immediately



In April 2014, Team volunteers spent two days lifting 13 sunken boats from the Fahaheel Boat Yard.

becomes less meaningful to her. She gives more of herself to the work when it's voluntary. Noura is hoping to be able to raise a bit of money for a future project and be able to keep spending most of her time volunteering.

Certainly, she is good at what she does: For the last eight years, Noura has worked with four hundred poor families to make sure they have what they need. Today, eighty-five of the families she started with no longer need help from The Basket. Among other things, the project organises children during Ramadan to collect and give away their own toys and candy. Noura has seen that the first time a student is involved in the giveaway, they are often sad and sullen – some of them because they had to give up their candy, but others because they are coming to see poverty for the first time. During the second year, however, students have an amazing time, and you can see the activity making a real difference in how they see and think about the world.



During one memorable operation at Ras Al-Ardh, the Team salvaged a submerged car rather than a boat. The principles and techniques were much the same, but it made for an interesting sight and attracted more public attention than usual!

"That's what I want for the Beach Clean-Up", Noura says, passionately hoping to make a real difference in students' lives.

Like Noura, Dari AlHuwail loves giving his time to build communities. "I'm a volunteer junkie in nature", he says. After earning his bachelor's degree in the United States, Dari took a ten-week break to go volunteer in Tanzania with Support for International Change before returning to earn his master's. Since 2002, Dari has worked with the Lothan Youth Achievement Centre (LoYAC) to build young people's capacity. Every summer when Dari would return to Kuwait for a few months between university terms, he would work with them. After his experiences in Tanzania, Dari helped launch "Kuwait for Kenya", a similar initiative creating opportunities for Kuwaiti citizens to assist with projects in Kenya. Working with LoYAC, Dari led two trips to Africa with teams of volunteers.

The entire time that Dari was studying and volunteering with these organisations, he thought about the Kuwait Dive Team and his high school dream of being a member. Teenage Dari read an article about the Dive Team's operations in the newspaper and thought it sounded amazing. He put the KDT logo on his mother's car, hoping to eventually inherit the car and work with the Team. An interesting dream, since Dari had never so much as touched an oxygen tank. His chance came while in Tanzania, when he and his volunteer



A Dive Team member hefts abandoned fishing gear during a coastal clean-up at Ushairij.

colleagues took a few days at the end of their programmes to visit the island of Zanzibar. Walking along the beach, Dari found a diving centre. Insisting he was incredibly interested and really wanted to get certified, Dari convinced the instructor to give him a compressed course. In four days, Dari learned to dive, took the written examination, completed his test dive, and earned his license.

Of course, as soon as he earned his license, Dari was due back to America to start his master's studies. So still, his high school vision of volunteering with the Kuwait Dive Team was still merely a dream, though perhaps slightly more realistic now that he knew how to operate a regulator. Finally, after finishing his second degree and getting Kuwait for Kenya launched, Dari set forth to find the Kuwait Dive Team. After several humorous mishaps as a result of accidentally signing for the Kuwait Div*ing* Team (a training centre) instead of the Kuwait Dive Team, Dari finally joined in 2007. Today, he serves as the Team's International



The Team practices salvage techniques and diving safety in training pools in between live operations.

Relations Officer. The volunteer junkie has found his home and a steady supply of work for his addiction.

Full-Time Workers, Full-Time Volunteers

When the Kuwait Dive Team was formed, it was entirely volunteer-run. At the beginning, Waleed would send letters to the volunteers' companies asking for permission for time off in order to carry out their work. Some of the ministries would grant the holiday time, but it became clear in time that the volunteers' careers were being harmed by the practice. The volunteers were building expertise on salvaging techniques at the expense of getting better at their paid work. Taking as much time off as possible, even for such a great cause, meant no bonuses, no promotions. After two years, the Team changed the practice and began undertaking all of their operations in afternoons (the Kuwaiti work day is generally 7:30am-2pm), holidays, and weekends. Volunteers now give up their evenings, nights, and holidays to perform the important conservation work only they are equipped to do.

Waleed began his professional



The Kuwait Dive Team recognises and appreciates its volunteers. Here, Team Member Noura AlSanousi presents Author Becca Farnum with a token of appreciation.



Lift bags, vital to underwater salvage, weigh a great deal themselves and take skills - including teamwork - to get in position during operations.





Volunteers remove hazardous materials, including abandoned tires and fishnets, from the beach during a clean-up.

career in 1977, six years before his first dive. Working his way up in the Office of Islamic Affairs and the Association of Culture, Waleed oversaw huge teams and gained an appreciation for both management and politics. In 1993, after the restructuring of post-Invasion Kuwait, Waleed became the Manager of the Grand Mosque in Kuwait City. The entire time, Waleed was also frantically spending as much time as possible building the Dive Team while raising his children.

Waleed loved his time at the Grand Mosque, and he was a beloved leader. Under his guidance, the Mosque's activities were massively expanded and volunteer programmes started. In 2009, he was asked to continue as Director, but declined in favour of an earlier "retirement". After thirty-three years in professional, full-time paid work, Waleed is now a full-time volunteer at the Kuwait Dive Team – "*Alhamdullilah*" ("Praise God"), he says.

Of course, not all of the Team's members are able to retire quite yet. Some of the volunteers work in customs, or at the Mosque, or are in full-time study. And while the idea of a fully voluntary group is a good one, in reality, it is difficult to carry out. In the Team's early years, everyone tried to take care of everything. After running this way for several years, the Team analysed their work and realised they were spending a great deal of time on support activities, limiting their ability to do the actual operations. Balancing their volunteerism with paid work and family commitments as they were, it was difficult to ensure the Team could keep up their everyday operations. In order to do the gruelling work that they do – and be on call and ready to help in the case of emergencies with

stranded animals, boats, and the like – the Team has to have a continual presence at the Port.

The team is supported financially by many of their volunteers, and also receives support from corporations and the government in the form of equipment hires and specific contracted labour. These contributions allow the Team to hire paid staff to help in running the Team's offices. Paid staff serve as the accountants for the Team, assist in formal communications between the Team and other



A volunteer removes debris during a coastal clean-up operation.

agencies, prepare and distribute press releases, and the like. No one who runs or assists in the active dive operations is paid. The Team is and remains a volunteer organisation dedicated to fostering not only environmentalism, but also volunteerism in the Gulf. And the members of the Dive Team take that mandate very seriously. Volunteer status does not mean a lack of dedication, responsibility, or accountability. "When I volunteer here, I must be the best at my job", Alaa tells me. And, of course, she is – despite what Waleed's teasing would suggest. During a quiet moment at the Team Headquarters, Waleed and Mahmoud look up the new movie "Lucy". Waleed yells out that he is very clever; he probably uses six per cent of his brain, and tells Alaa that she only uses 1.5% of hers. She quickly replies that he had better be doing more and better work if that is the case.



In addition to mainland beaches, the Kuwait Dive Team cleans Umm AlMaradim island.

Creating Community, Forging Family

The members of the Kuwait Dive Team volunteer because they are passionate about the environment and Kuwait. And the work they do is often gruelling, messy, and unglamorous. But it is also rewarding. There is, of course, the sense of satisfaction that results from a job well done, from knowing that they've done something to make a difference. But there is also the joy that is found in creating and being part of a truly caring community. Diving together, hauling nets, operating machinery: These are activities that forge deep and lasting relationships. You learn to trust each other very quickly under the water. You have to – in certain circumstances, your life may suddenly literally depend on each other.



Sunken ships and vessels from the Souq Sharq boat yard in Kuwait City are lifted by the Team.

The Kuwait Dive Team is much more than a group of people who happen to work together occasionally. It is a family. That status comes with all of the joys and laughter, teasing and support that parents and siblings and extended relatives supply. It also comes with the occasional hiccup caused by disagreement and change. But if there is one thing the Kuwait Dive Team is good at, it's weathering change: The Team worked under the auspices of several different organisations, shifting between associations for a few decades before deciding to formally register their own. The day-to-day operations of the Team require constant flexibility and a willingness to drastically change the plan. While differing opinions and external pressures may create the odd spot of tension, for the most part, the Team works in a state of harmony and mutual support. If ever there is an issue, they move forward with a simple philosophy: "No problems - everything go to solutions!"

The Team's impact on the lives of its members cannot be overstated. As Mahmoud reflects on what to tell me about his involvement in the Team, he says "It is the best thing that has happened in my life after my wife and my child. I find myself with the Kuwait Dive Team. This is where I must be".

Waleed our Father

If the Kuwait Dive Team is a family, Waleed is its patriarch. A devout Muslim, family is an important value for Waleed, and work-life balance is a major concern. Waleed tells me, joy evident in his voice, that all of his children are proud of him and his work. Though his children might have wondered where their father was during their childhood, they saw him in newspapers and on television talking about the Team's work and the importance of the reefs. Seeing that he was working for the future of Kuwait, they quickly came to believe in him and his work. Waleed also notes that many fathers will stay with their families for ten hours but without doing much of anything. When he is with his children or grandchildren, he works to make even just thirty minutes feel like two hours. Watching Waleed interact with Kuwaiti schoolchildren during a Beach Clean-Up Day, I can easily believe it. Playing with and distracting the children on the beach whilst their teachers were trying to get them together for a group photo, Waleed caused Alaa to roll her eyes at him, yell at him to stop, and exasperatedly mutter "he is a little boy!" Eating dinner with the women and

children of Waleed's house on Thursday afternoon, I ask his daughters if they have any embarrassing stories about their father they want me to include in the book. The girls all laugh. "I have a list", says his wife, her voice full of love and her eyes glittering with a teasing light.

Whenever possible, Waleed brings his children along to the Team's work. When he worked at the Mosque, his three daughters volunteered there to help organise prayers. His youngest son, Yousif, is the youngest diver ever licensed in Kuwait.

But his biological children and grandchildren are not Waleed's only family. Everyone I spoke to, from the volunteers to the support staff to his family, praised Waleed's dedication and commitment, not only to the Team and marine



The Dive Team removes damaged vessels burned during a 2013 fire at the Souq Sharq boat yard.





A large ship is lifted at the AlBidaa Coast.

conservation, but also to community and mentorship. Time and time again, I heard from everyone "Waleed is like our father". "Waleed is a father for the team. He puts the idea. And he cares about us and protect and he give us idea". Alaa used to formally work for Waleed when he was the Director of the Grand Mosque. Now, she works for him as a volunteer with the Team. In both positions, she says, "he not manager, he leader. One word from him, everyone be working". My driver for the week told me, "I'm working here because I like Waleed AlFadhel. He's a very nice guy. It's not only because he's my boss I tell you he's a nice guy. He's really really nice guy. Hard worker. Like no other Kuwaiti". Another of the staff members tells me of how much Waleed helped him when he moved to Kuwait from Egypt. "He makes me like his son", Mohammad tells me. The emotion in his eyes and his voice is enough to make me tear up.

I have no doubt that the Kuwait Dive Team will continue to exist long after Waleed AlFadhel is able to actively dive with them. Its sustainability is a credit to his effective leadership. Part of the Team's success lay in his ability to encourage and incorporate others' ideas and suggestions: Though there is no doubt that everyone holds the utmost respect for him, the Team itself is run as a group, with decisions being made collectively and everyone involved having their own role. "We balance each other", one volunteer says, even as she acknowledges that the Team will always owe its life breath to one extraordinary visionary. Kuwaitis are sometimes called "sons of the sea". But Waleed may well be its father.



5

Sons of the Sea and Daughters of the Deep: *Educating a New Generation of Environmental Activists*

"*Banati*!" calls Waleed, gathering the students to him in the classroom with exhortations of "my girls!" Every Tuesday finds the Kuwait Dive Team at an open-air café on the beach, the building used during the day as a community centre. A colourful van is parked in front, its design illustrating various marine creatures and proclaiming itself the "Mobile Beach Clean-Up Unit". Several volunteers work around the van, carrying supplies and sorting rubbish. The first school arrives for their special fieldtrip, and two classrooms' worth of girls clamber out of the van, jabbering excitedly in a mixture of English and Arabic.

Not quite a third of the students are veiled, though both of their teachers are. Many of the students are not yet old enough to be expected to wear *hijab*. Several of them never will.

The students are shepherded toward the van to take a group photo, jockeying for position and jostling for the honour to hold the sign. We usher them into the air-conditioned classroom, and Waleed gets to work. He's fantastic with the kids, his portable mic headset allowing him to move around the students. He runs them all to the window to look at the sea. He makes them take a big breath like a whale. "Banati, how much of the world is made of water? Why do we call it the Blue Planet?" He has the students name the countries of the Gulf, identify different water sports and beach creatures. And then he becomes more serious, talking about volunteering and showing depressing images of animals with rubbish in their bellies and plastic wrapped around their throats. The girls learn



Schoolgirls pose with the rubbish they have collected during a Mobile Beach Clean-Up.

that sea turtles eat jellyfish, and realise how similar plastic bags floating in the water look. They hear about the operations of the Kuwait Dive Team and are told how they can help. The classroom presentation concludes with the students' taking an environmental volunteering oath all together.

Down the hall, Alaa is presenting for the first time. Running two classes at once means the Team can invite more schools and the students can spend more time on the beach. After the presentations, the students get geared up: gloves and masks on, brooms and bags distributed. Noura comes to walk the group to the beach. As they leave the classroom, another school bus pulls up and the next classroom takes their photo. They'll head in for a presentation and the rotation will keep going for several hours.

On the beach, the students are sent off in pairs to collect rubbish. There is a competition to see who can collect the most. Laughing over my broken Arabic, the students and I walk the beach to pick up harmful waste. Again and again, they excitedly point to washed up crab legs. We talk about how the crab





As part of their marine conservation day, Kuwaiti schoolchildren race to 'save' the marine creatures caught in an abandoned fishing net.



The Mobile Beach Clean-Up Unit engages future generations to preserve coastal areas. Students from around Kuwait learn about the importance of the world's oceans and pitch in to help keep them healthy. The Kuwait Dive Team's programs nurture environmental awareness while boosting students' personal confidence and professional skills.

Students learn about the Dive Team and explore marine conservation during the"My Environment, My Home" Expo.





legs will break down and become something like sand, so it isn't rubbish. The plastic bottle caps, though, along with silverware and candy wrappers, are scooped into the bag. Two of the girls' bag becomes so heavy with large rubbish I have to bring them another bag.

After twenty minutes of rubbish collection, the students are called to a large banner. They take a photo with all of the rubbish they have collected, and move to a net to play a game. KDT Volunteers have entangled model animals in the net. Split into two teams, the girls race to free their animals of the deadly fishing net. They then get to experience some real animals: One of Kuwait's research centres has found that the population of *Acanthopagrus latus*, the yellowfin seabream, is threatened. To help restore the species' vitality in Kuwaiti waters, the centre donates several fish each week for release. Waleed explains to the students why the fish need to be reintroduced as a volunteer carries a tank forward. Two students move forward, and Waleed hands them one of the fish. The girls giggle as the fish flop in their hands and toss the fish toward the water. Waleed hands me one of the fish to toss in. Startled by a sudden movement, I fail to throw the fish far enough. The students laugh hysterically at the look on my face as Waleed shakes his head at me and wades out to throw the fish properly.

Done at the beach, I collect the students and walk them back to the café, where snacks and drinks are waiting for us. As we march, the girls laugh at my mangled English and Arabic, accented with American, Egyptian, and British inflections. We wash our hands and the girls play the guessing game with my



A Kuwaiti school class gathers by the Kuwait Mobile Beach Clean-Up Unit Truck.

age. I pull out my phone to take a selfie with them, and instantly others beckon me over for their turn with the camera. I ask what their favourite part of the day was. "Picking up on the beach", the first replies, somewhat shyly. Thirteen other girls agree, while others enjoyed playing and singing, seeing the water, releasing the fish, and – inevitably – the food.

It's time for this group of girls to go back to school. They attend a private school, taught in both English and Arabic. Some of the other classes of the day come from government schools, where English is less likely to be taught. Most of the younger students don't know English well, but they make up for it with hugs and enthusiasm, parroting back "Welcome, Beeka!" at Waleed's prompting. One of the classrooms is running a new programme, teaching students flag etiquette. I get the chance to see them salute the flag as one of the young girls leads her class in the national anthem.

The Teacher: Alaa Almuhaini

The Team has been running Mobile Beach Clean-Ups for two years, interacting with about two hundred students each Tuesday. Students leave with a greater understanding of marine ecology, environmental conservation, and the power of volunteering. Teachers get photos of their students doing great work and posters, along with activity packets to use in their classrooms for continued learning.

Noura, who we met in the chapter on volunteerism, is vital to the organisation and implementation of the Mobile Beach Clean-Up Unit. Also integral is Alaa, Director of Outreach and Cultural Programmes for the Kuwait Dive Team.

Alaa came to the Kuwait Dive Team through her work at the Grand Mosque, where she met Waleed AdFadhel when he was the Mosque's Director. She credits Waleed with the growth and enhanced programming of the Mosque, happily listing the great work now done by the religious institution. At the Mosque, Alaa works on children's programming. After work one day, she shows me a video of a class visit to the Mosque that afternoon, proudly describing the discussion they had with boys about friendships, role models, and making good decisions.

Alaa takes on a lot of roles at the Kuwait Dive Team, but perhaps her favourite is with the Mobile Beach Clean-Up, where she works to organise access to schools and classroom visits with the Ministry of Education. While I was visiting, Alaa presented by herself at the Beach Clean-Up for the first time. Afterward, she tells me how important it is to her that she is able to creatively speak to the students' level. Given the excitement of the students on the beach, she had clearly done a good job. Ever the teaser, Waleed tells her that he received three complaints about her presentation. We roll our eyes at him, knowing he's lying. Then he scolds her, chastising her to make sure she doesn't become a better teacher then he is.

Alaa also volunteers for a school club, serving as a chaperone on fieldtrips and running activities. In spite of all of her work with children and her clear passion for education, Alaa is firm that she does not want to be a teacher – at least, not



Author Becca Farnum takes a selfie with her team of schoolchildren from a Beach Clean-Up Day.

as a formally defined career. She finds classroom teachers' jobs too limiting in what they can do and the impact they can have. Instead, she concentrates her attention on volunteering with supplemental educational programmes and on spoiling her niece and nephew. She also spoils the other volunteers at the Kuwait Dive Team, always ensuring there are plenty of snacks around and allowing the younger volunteers to call her "Auntie Alaa".

It is clear that Alaa is at the Dive Team for the message and the teaching. She's volunteered with the Team since 2011...but she herself does not know anything about swimming or diving. When it comes to creating flashcards to teach Kuwaiti schoolchildren the names of the fish they might find in their oceans, dreaming up a new activity to run during Beach Clean-Ups, or fostering mentorships, though, Alaa knows what she's doing – and does it very happily.

Driving me to the Mall to explore Kuwait's famous shopping "Avenues", Alaa shares her hope that the Kuwait Dive Team will be able to expand their kids' educational programming to the "Kidzania" Centre at the country's largest mall. That way, the Team's message would reach six hundred thousand children a year. Asking Alaa what she would change about the Kuwait Dive Team is unnecessary. It's clear her answer will be "more, more more!" This teacher has a message to share and won't rest until Kuwait is full of youth who know the value of their environment and how to care for it as involved citizens.





The Kuwait Dive Team engages with other divers and young enthusiasts at the 2010 Birmingham DIVE Show.

The Team's work with youth is not limited to one-off activities during the school day. Several of the Team's members are very young, and the Team is dedicated to training and mentoring. I had the chance to meet the two youngest volunteers – but their youth is far from the only factor that makes them stand out or worthy of mention in these pages.

For the Love of the Dive: Hamad Bouresly

Hamad Bouresly is a diver. I suspect he is actually part fish, given his total adoration for marine ecosystems and his constant desire to be underwater. Hamad earned his diving master's license in 2008 as a young teen. Fresh from my first dive in water just over three metres deep when I met Hamad, my jaw drops open when he tells me he just dove in water going down three *kilo*metres. He visited Florida to dive in the Atlantic Ocean, what Kuwaitis used to call the "Ocean of Darkness" because it is so deep. I cannot yet conceive going that far down, but I can only imagine it must be amazing. Hamad learned a fun fact about shrimp on that dive...taking out his regulator, he grinned wide and let the creatures clean his teeth. He's dived near Honduras in the Mexican Gulf and in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. He's seen an eighty-year-old turtle and loves to collect souvenirs of marine life. He laughs, recalling that he was traveling with a large turtle shell at the same time the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" movie came out. The best way to transport the shell was to rope it onto himself like a backpack – which led to police questions and children posing near him for photos. I ask him if there is anywhere else in the world he would like to dive. He



President Waleed AlFadhel speaks with students about marine conservation during a Beach Clean-Up.

has quite the long bucket list, but his three priorities are the Maldives, the Mexican Coves, and Alaska – though the latter has both of us laughing over the cold and the possibility of bears.

It's clear that Hamad loves diving, but he makes it clear that his favourite work and his favourites dives are with the Kuwait Dive Team. Hamad was not yet born during the invasion in 1990 by Iraqi forces, but he obviously appreciates the history of his organisation. He points to the Guinness World Record the Team holds for their boat salvaging work immediately after the war and tells me "I am very proud to be a member of Kuwait Dive Team"; happy to be part of work helping the world, the marine ecosystem, and volunteerism. He thanks "Captain Waleed" for introducing him to the mission and vision of the Team and training him in skills and operational procedures.

I ask him how he became involved. When he was thirteen, Hamad saw some information about the Kuwait Dive Team and was immediately enthralled. He made presentations about the Team's work in his school. After two years of research, he asked his father for permission to become involved. In 2009, he

became a full member of the Dive Team. “It changed my life. Whole life”, he says, his voice sincere and entirely devoid of the irony or triteness that often accompanies such sentiment. When asked the most important skill he has learned from the Kuwait Dive Team, Hamad thinks for a minute and then responds “To face obstacles…in the water, above water, in life”.

Waleed and Mahmoud both had transformative moments the first time they dived underwater, Hamad’s first operation with the Team was equally memorable – though in a rather different way. After convincing his parents that he should be allowed to volunteer with the Kuwait Dive Team, Hamad undertook his first mission with them in 2009. The Team went to Umm AlMaradim Island and salvaged seven tonnes of giant truck tyres. All was going well until suddenly the volunteers found three big bombs. The bombs were active and could have exploded. Uncontrolled underwater detonations can be devastating for the marine life in the area regardless of where they take place. Given that these bombs were located near a beach popular for swimming, they were a particular concern. Reporting the bombs to the Coast Guard resulted in the Kuwaiti Army coming to defuse the explosives and clear away the rubbish.

Part of Hamad’s love for diving may come from his passion for learning. He chastises me for ever having wasted any of my free time, saying that “every minute, you have to discover something new”. He is now in his second year as an undergraduate studying accounting at the American University of the Middle East, Kuwait. During his first year, he became the president of the university’s environmental club and won an award for his activism. As a young student, there is no doubt that Hamad is learning and growing under the Dive Team’s influence. He pays the mentorship he receives forward. His passion for working with younger students is based in the wisdom of a proverb he shares with me: “When you learn as a child, like scratching a stone. When you learn as an adult, like scratching on the water”. Educational and volunteering programmes with young people have greater impacts, better shaping their more flexible minds.

Hamad’s work with youth education is also building his own skillset. The Kuwait Dive Team regularly presents at various exhibitions around Kuwait. Hamad often attends these to speak, chatting with the people who come by the Dive Team's



The Kuwait Dive Team fights ghostfishing by lifting abandoned gear.

booth, talking about the Team's vision and mission, and suiting up in gear and doing demonstration dives in a temporary pool. He'll tell the students funny stories to make their time at the KDT Booth more memorable and have them throw coins and toys into the pool for him to dive for. A lot of the work that the Dive Team does is hard work and "sometimes ugly", as Hamad puts it – but his experience at these exhibitions is helping him learn how to present information well. He is an increasingly good public speaker, but he's also learning how to more effectively use a wide range of media. Hamad is a member of the Dive Team's Media Centre, ensuring that all of the operations are carefully recorded. The Kuwait Dive Team regularly publicises photos and rough videos of their work via Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube, sharing their message of the need for marine conservation with the world. Hamad tries to use these records to drive home to people the fact that environmental sustainability is not a luxury, it is a necessity. "This is your home. This is your Earth", he says.

Hamad is beginning to direct documentary movies, taking courses





Kuwaiti communities and younger generations join in cleaning up Fahaheel Beach.



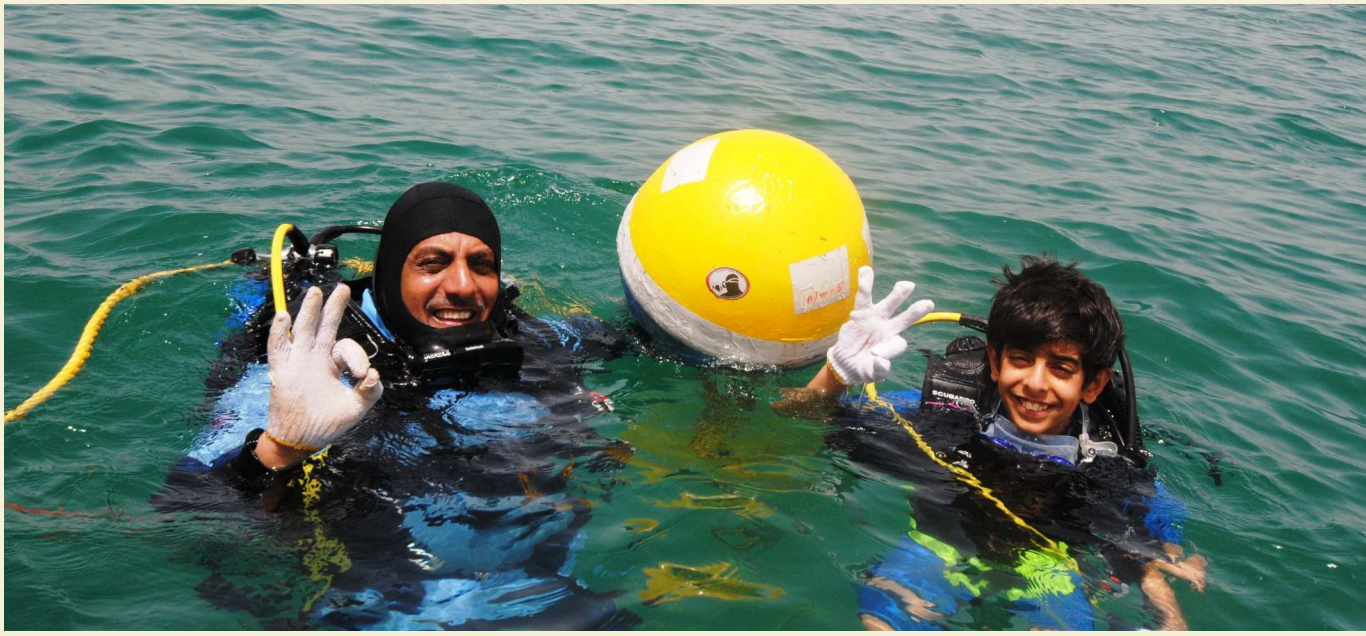


Divers and other volunteers clean 10 tons of rubbish from Fahaheel beach.

about the technical side of things and learning to write commentaries in the style of National Geographic. He pulls out his phone and shows me his first ever documentary, a five minute video of a ship wrecked in Honduras in 2003 that had sunk about thirty metres deep. The movie highlights the divers and local sites of Honduras as well as including underwater footage of the boat itself. Perhaps, in time, we'll see a full-length documentary directed by Mr. Hamad Bouresly about the Kuwait Dive Team airing on the Discovery Channel. In the meantime, he continues to work toward his dream of changing the world and speaking out. "Every second that I just keep silent...what's the difference between me and them?" Thanks to the support, training, and mentorship he receives from his fellow volunteers at the Kuwait Dive Team, Hamad will never be silent.

In His Father's Footsteps: Yousif AlFadhel

One of the ways to balance a dedication to volunteerism with the need to spend time with your family is to involve them in your work. All of Waleed's children dive, and all of his sons have taken part in some of the Dive Team's operations. The youngest of them, whom I am able to meet over a family dinner one night, is particularly keen.



Yousif celebrates with his father after successfully replacing a mooring buoy.

Seven years ago, then-seven-year-old Yousif went to Kubbar Island for the first time with the Kuwait Dive Team. His father had promised him he could help change a buoy. This seems to be a relatively safe introductory operation for first-time volunteers...though I wonder if I should be insulted or complimented that my first time on a boat in Kuwait I was treated to the same first activity as a seven-year-old! Much as we spontaneously found and salvaged a fridge on my day of operations, the Team suddenly came across a net during Yousif's first trip. "Helping" the Team pull the net up, Yousif's love for KDT was born.

A year and a half ago, Yousif became the youngest ever diver licensed in Kuwait. Previously, Yousif would dive three or four metres accompanying his father using the second regulator. Licensed, he is allowed to dive thirty metres with his own equipment. He has been interviewed live on television several times to discuss his record as a young diver and his work with the Kuwait Dive Team. He's also received lots of newspaper and magazine press. Clearly he is proud of his accomplishments, but it is abundantly clear as we talk that what he is happiest about is the chance to do good and important work side by side with his father. Yousif speaks about the trust that diving has built between him and his father. "My father knows me very well and he knows what I like and what I don't like. He

knows what I want. He understands me. That's what I like about him". The youngest of six siblings, being involved in the reality of operations likely makes Yousif feel less like the baby of the family and more like an important member of the Team.

And so he is. The photos of the Kuwait Dive Team's operations regularly show Yousif involved in pulling nets out of the water, helping with beach clean-ups, and demonstrating diving techniques at exhibitions. Asked about his favourite memory with the Team, Yousif replies with the most technically challenging operation he worked on: Working underwater with a cylinder and airbag to do salvage work. Lifting debris floating on the water's surface is hard work and can sometimes create difficulties, but bringing rubbish up from under the water is an entirely different matter, requiring proper techniques and carefully deployed skills.

Yousif actually has about a decade's worth of experience with the Dive Team. Showing him a digitised old photograph of a young boy on a ship, I ask him if he remembers what was happening. He remembered a day when, as a four-year-old boy, he accompanied his father to Shuwaikh Port, where the Kuwait Dive Team's headquarters were. That day, his father taught him about ships and trade links. He saw the Port where materials came in from India and other places.
After earning his license, Waleed promised Yousif he could dive in a pool. At the Kuwait Dive Team's gathering for all of the divers in the Gulf, Yousif demonstrated some of the skills he was learning on the Team while his father gave a presentation. He helped teach adult divers how to free animals caught in fishing nets.

Beacon and mooring buoys that are placed in the water to mark hazards or demarcate reefs and borders need to be brightly coloured and very visible. For beacon buoys especially, this means that they need to be fairly high. A sinking buoy is a hazard in and of itself, causing environmental damage as it crashes on a reef and/or releases harmful materials into the water. It also poses a serious danger to ships that may crash on a partially submerged, less visible buoy or the hazard it is supposed to be alerting drivers to. Waleed is building a great



The Dive Team participates in Kuwait's International Volunteer Day each year.

deal of expertise on buoy maintenance, regularly helping to swap out ropes but also helping to remove and replace damaged buoys.

Many of the Team's operations are not particularly child-friendly. One particularly memorable night for Yousif's mother, the volunteers did not return to the harbour until after 1am. They travelled to Kubbar Island only to find a boat that had crashed into the island and filled with sand. Using a crane, the Team scooped up as much of the sand as they could. They then pulled the boat more fully into the water and attached it to parachutes – large 'balloons' attached to heavy equipment to force it to float on the water. When the heavy, still sand-logged boat was finally above the water and attached to the Team's boat, they tugged it back to the mainland, driving slowly so as to not flip over.

Several years ago, an accidental fire at a port destroyed nearly thirty boats, threw burned fridges and other major rubbish into the water, and killed hundreds of fish. The Kuwait Dive Team was quickly called to survey the damage and help in the clean up. A week after the initial survey, the Team went back to salvage all of the boats and other major rubbish in the port.

A photo of Yousif helping to lift a net comes up. His face is screwed up, reminding me of how I doubtless look when lifting weights at the gym. "You're clearly working very hard!" I say. He scoffs, puffs his chest, and says confidently, "I may be acting".





Young people play an important role in Kuwait Dive Team operations.

Like all of the members of the Kuwait Dive Team, Yousif has a soft spot for the incredible beauty to be found under the sea. I ask Yousif to "Imagine you are talking to an American who knows nothing about the Middle East, nothing about Kuwait, and nothing about diving. What would you tell them?" He immediately replies "I would advise them to start diving, because underwater's a different world...I would advise him to dive because it's like...so amazing".

Yousif dives extensively in Kuwait, but he does not go on the international training trips the older members of the Team sometimes take. I ask Yousif where he would dive if he could go anywhere in the world. He remembers a family vacation to San Diego, California, when he saw amazing water that was colder than Kuwait's and would have very different kinds of life. He asked Waleed if he could dive, but there was not time in their holiday. Somewhat sadly, he says "I wish I had dived there with my father". More happily, he also recalls the enthusiasm in his father's voice when Waleed returned from a dive in Italy. He became very curious to go into the caves there and find its creatures. "I have no idea what they're like", he says. "I just want to try going there". *Enshallah* ("God willing"), Yousif will get to try some day.

"If you have a son", I ask Yousif, "will you teach him to dive?" "Of course!" he replies. "If you have a daughter?" I challenge. There is a thoughtful pause before he resolutely says "Yeah" and nods his head determinedly.



6

Gender in the Gulf: *The Women of the Kuwait Dive Team*

Sitting in the Kuwait Dive Team's Headquarters at the Port my first day in the Gulf, Waleed finishes his introduction of the Team and asks if I have any questions. Glancing up from the six pages of handwritten notes I had frantically scrawled while Waleed was talking, it was clear my mind was far too full to even know where to begin. As I stumbled to say I was sure I would have questions but was looking forward to finding what I learned during the rest of the week, Noura nudged me. "Ask him about the question about women you asked me at lunch", she whispers.



During a Beach Clean-Up Day, teachers and students from a Kuwaiti school work to pick up rubbish after learning about the need for marine conservation.

Looking through the Dive Team's social media before leaving for Kuwait, I was struck by the fact that I did not see any women on the boats performing operations. At lunch with Noura my first day, I learned that she is a licensed diver. She's scubaed in Sharm el-Sheikh and knows her way around the water. Given her passion for volunteerism, then, why isn't she diving with the Team? I asked her, and she responds with a fairly rote comment about cultural barriers and does not dwell. She does not seem overly annoyed by it...but then she prodded me to ask Waleed a few hours later. Perhaps she is more upset by the sexism than she generally lets on.

At Noura's prodding, then, I ask Waleed about the role of women in the Kuwait Dive Team. Waleed points to concerns of culture, along with practical concerns. Sometimes, an operation will keep the Team out for two to three days. The boat

does not have facilities. Many of the Team's operations are really rather dangerous. Not all male members of the Team are permitted to undertake every project. The volunteers all have different areas of expertise. Waleed – and all of the leaders of Kuwait Dive Team operations – are responsible first and foremost for the safety of the volunteers.

Waleed clearly understands that this is a sensitive issue, and that I am not completely convinced. He points out that things are changing. "Nowadays, it's different", he says, pointing to how women throughout the Gulf are literally taking their rights, joining the government and driving cars in Saudi Arabic against laws and cultural norms.

Given the current realities in Kuwait, it is true that having unmarried women stay overnight with men on a boat could have negative repercussions for them. In response to this concern, I point out that there could be a female-only team. Waleed jokingly promises that if I manage to complete all five of the planned operations tomorrow, he'll start a women's team.

The next evening, I point out to Waleed that I completed all of the operations on the boat – and so he has to "pay up" with a women's team! He laughs. And several times driving back, he says "Beeka, please tell Noura and Alaa you had a bad time. You didn't like it!" I laugh back at him, and just say "oh no! You owe me a Team!"

That day, I did successfully complete a variety of operations. But there were a few struggling moments. Have *you* ever tried to put on a wetsuit in front of five Kuwaiti men on a boat whilst preserving basic modesty? The work of the Kuwait Dive Team is demanding and very physical. And working next to them in a skin-tight wetsuit on projects requiring close proximity, my feminist frustration slowly gives way to a grudging respect for just how much the Team are pushing themselves to work with a woman on board.

When I ask Dari about gender issues at the Team, his answer is lengthier. He admits that the Team, traditionally, has not had any women on board ship. He posits that this is due to the nature of the fairly conservative, small, and family-



Kuwaiti schoolgirls salute their flag during a Beach Clean-Up Day.

oriented culture in Kuwait. Seeing a woman in a bikini on the beach or on a diving boat does not jive well in the Kuwaiti mindset with environmental conservation. The judgment, Dari asserts, will fall much less on the men and more on the women. The men of the Kuwait Dive Team would be devastated to hear negative comments about their wives and daughters, and were unwilling to take that risk.

More progressive Dari has always challenged that. He has told the Team that he plans to bring his wife (he's currently engaged) to operations. Dari is a certified instructor, and will teach her how to dive if she's willing. The Team does not have a formal policy against women. The true, honest answer as Dari sees it is "we're willing". "It's not about your gender", Dari says, but rather about your commitment to missions and operations and whether the Team can trust volunteers to keep themselves and others safe under the water.

Dari points out that a major step forward was "actually getting you on the boat".

My work with the Team pushed a lot of boundaries. Dari believes that "having you there and having you do all these things was a sign that we're getting better at and getting ready [for women on the Team]". It is a slow-moving process, but change is happening. The Team has partnered with a number of organisations and operations including women, and they are currently working to help a female Kuwaiti diver complete some marine research.

Dari does, however, also bring up one story about how dangerous his work is. When working at a boatyard once with a crane, Dari called to the volunteers to put their hardhats one in case of an accident, but everyone was very relaxed about things. One volunteer was standing incredibly close to the boat as the boom of the crane came toward it. Suddenly, they heard a sound as a cable became loose and the boom came down. The volunteer nearby was just feet away from the falling boom, and his leg was nearly crushed. Terrified, that volunteer did not come back to work with the Team for nearly two months.

Announcing I was headed to Kuwait for a week of fieldwork, I was met with a flurry of "please be safe!" messages. Not the traditional "Safe flight!" or "Bon Voyage" that other international trips had elicited, but instead implicit – and sometimes explicit – messages of "please be safe as a woman in the Middle East".

It would be easy to allow the fact that women have not previously dived with the Kuwait Dive Team to reinforce Western stereotypes of the 'oppressed' female in the Middle East. But as I listen to several members of the Team talk about how dangerous the work can be and their fears for how women who volunteered with them would be regarded by others, I am struck by just how many similar conversations I have had in America and Britain about the role of women in the military.

Again and again, I have sat in politics classrooms and listened to men talk about their concerns over whether women could "carry their weight" in combat roles. People bring up the high mortality rates, the way society will treat women after service, the limited facilities in the field...all very similar concerns voiced by the men of the Kuwait Dive Team.



Kuwaiti schoolchildren and teachers prepare supplies during a Beach Clean-Up Day.

The validity of these arguments can – and should – be debated. But they need to be debated in all societies, and the debate is probably best an internal one. Western assumptions that the women of the Middle East are somehow 'more' oppressed than women in other cultures seem to be rooted in wider misunderstandings about a culture not their own. Kuwait is a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, much like the United Kingdom. Women have held the right to vote since 2005 (voting was first introduced in Kuwait in the 1980s) and have held positions in the Cabinet and Parliament. And things are improving – the country is ranked 22nd for Gender Development in the 2014 Human Development Report, above many Western countries.

Spending just a week with some of the women in Kuwait challenged my own assumptions about their roles and agency. Women in the Gulf do not have some

of the 'freedoms' that Western women do – but similarly, they have opportunities and options that Westerners don't. And a great many things are much the same for women between the West and the Middle East. Above all, the fact that gendered issues come with a great deal of diversity. In both regions, individual women express their agencies and identities in a variety of ways. Some are veiled, others would fit in well anywhere in America. Some women happily embrace 'traditional' gender roles of their communities while others push the envelope. And even those that seem to fit Western stereotypes of 'repressed Arab women' challenge convention in their own way.

One volunteer, small in stature and wearing fully covering black robes, shares her own version of liberation with me. Traditionally, Kuwaitis have lived in large house complexes with the entire family, even when married with young children. Increasingly, though, there are independent flats, and Kuwaitis are beginning to take them. As we go out one night, she points out some of the apartments – and tells me she would like one by herself. Sunday night, she shares her dream of spending a year in America on a roadtrip with a scarf and sunglasses. Tuesday afternoon, she expresses her desire for a motorcycle. The mental image of this petite, veiled Kuwaiti woman on a motorcycle cruising Route 66 makes me laugh – but it also names and shames the assumptions we Westerners tend to make based on presentations of gender in societies not our own.

Another thirty-year-old female volunteer scoffs at the conventional narrative of 'get married and have babies' while her sister, four years younger than she, is already a married mother. Unveiled, this volunteer owns and drives a large SUV by herself. Walking through the *souq* (traditional outdoor market) one night – the sight of two unaccompanied, unveiled females is actually rather unremarkable in downtown Kuwaiti – our conversation is interrupted by a call from her best friend. After hearing what I was doing in Kuwait, her friend said she wanted to be in the book. I asked what kind of character she would like to be. Her reply: "Just one sentence – 'I'm hot and everyone wants me'".

Perceived differences between cultures break down more and more as the week goes on: Touring the Aquarium and Scientific Centre, we see fruit bats. I confess to one of the volunteers that I love bats but am afraid of vampires. She asks "So





Author Becca Farnum and Volunteer Noura AlSanousi visit Kuwait's Grand Mosque. Like in many synagogues and churches, women are asked to cover their hair and be modestly dressed in the religious space.

you don't like *Twilight*?" When I shudder and respond "no", she says "But it's a love movie!" Walking past the clownfish, we jinx each other exclaiming "Nemo!!" On my last night in Kuwait, she takes me to the cinema to see Keanu Reeves' new action movie "John Wick".

"If we didn't have Alaa, if we didn't have Noura...we wouldn't be where we are today", Dari tells me, calling Alaa "our encyclopaedia". Female volunteers are an integral – and growing – part of the Kuwait Dive Team. The Team is intentionally working to change the culture of Kuwait for greater environmental sustainability. Along the way, they are shifting cultural paradigms of gender and power as well.



7

Diving Diplomacy: *Forging International Partnerships through Coral*

When I first arrived at the Kuwait Dive Team's Headquarters, Waleed sat me down to discuss his goals for this book. Beyond the information about the Team and the environment and volunteerism, Waleed shared his dream for a "new story". Kuwaitis are aware of the Western media's focus on war, conflict, and other negatives in the Middle East. The Team's volunteers are hopeful that sharing their story in the US and the UK can help "change the image" of the Gulf. Several times throughout the week, members tell me "this work I do? I do it for you". The environment, after all, is shared around the world. Pollution and degradation in the Gulf cause harm to the resources of the West...and vice versa.

But thogh the environment's global connection creates the possibility of shared harm, it also creates opportunities for shared progress and care. The Kuwait Dive Team uses their salvage expertise, passion for diving, and knowledge of corals to form relationships with other teams and organisations at home and around the world. They build links based on diving, environmental sustainability, and volunteerism. I first came into contact with the Kuwait Dive Team through one such bit of outreach.

The American Middle Eastern Network for Dialogue at Stanford

In February of 2011, as protests were erupting across North Africa and the Middle East, two Stanford University undergraduates met at a coffee shop. They had been born and raised in Bahrain – a small country just to the south of Kuwait – and Chicago respectively. A conversation ensued about the power of youth leaders to create positive social, political, and economic change; the necessity of sharing their ideas and experiences with the world; and the profound potential for collaboration and improved understanding between the Middle East, North Africa, and the United States.

Given the 2011 uprisings and the West's increased interest in youth activism in the region, Khaled Alshawi and Elliot Stoller found willing professors to mentor and funders to support a dialogue platform bringing Middle Eastern and American change agents together. And so a simple coffee shop conversation became AMENDS, the American and Middle Eastern Network for Dialogue at Stanford. Two students became twenty, and what had only been a dream of knowing more about what was happening on the ground in the Middle East and North Africa became an Annual Summit of Delegates chosen for their potential to affect real change in the region on the basis of ongoing projects they lead around a variety of social, economic, environmental, and political issues.

In April 2013, I was honoured to be selected as an AMENDS Delegate for my academic work highlighting environmental peacebuilding in the region. The week was one of the most enjoyable and impactful of my life if for no other reason than it was at that week that I met Dari AlHuwail and was introduced to the work of the Kuwait Dive Team.



The Kuwait Dive Team hosted a Forum for Dive Teams from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Dari attended AMENDS as the Team's International Relations Officer. He and I were assigned to the same peer review group for our AMENDS Talks. Every AMENDS Summit closes with ten-minute presentations from all of the delegates, presenting their social change initiatives to the world. Dari and I had the chance to talk about our work with each other while honing our presentations.

On the eighth of July 2014, I received an email from Dari. "[W]ould you be interested in writing a small book about Kuwait Dive Team and its history?



The Dive Team participated in the Coral Reefs of the Gulf Conference held in Abu Dhabi.



Dari shares the work of the Dive Team at a conference.



Explorer and documentary filmmaker Jean-Michel Cousteau visits the Dive Team.



Dari speaks about the Dive Team at the Coral Reefs of the Gulf Conference.

[This would include] a one week trip to Kuwait to be with us here for interviews and more in depth observations." I responded immediately – I had never been to the Gulf before, and the chance to see Dari's amazing work up close was not to be missed.

And so, a chance meeting at a coffee shop in Stanford evolved to a scuba dive for a random American girl in Kuwait. This is the power of AMENDS, and this is the power of the Kuwait Dive Team. Dari, and the other volunteers of the Team, use their love for corals and their commitment to environmental volunteerism to reach beyond the borders of their small country to make global impacts.

Partnerships

The Kuwait Dive Team is far from the only organisation with a passion for our planet's waters. Working with groups like Project AWARE, the World Underwater Federation, and the Ocean Conservancy is the core of the Team's international diplomacy.

Project AWARE is an initiative of the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), one of the world's largest diving consortiums. The project provides education, training and resources for divers on how to minimise their environmental impact in recreational diving and maximise the benefit they can provide the oceans, encouraging everyone to "take only pictures; leave only bubbles". The Team has visited southern California to meet with Project AWARE's Director and regularly shares resources.

The Ocean Conservancy is based in Washington, D.C. Dari sits on their International Coordinators Network.



In 1999, the Operations Centre overseeing the restoration of the Fat'h Al-Khair Boom was visited by many individuals interested in Kuwaiti and marine tradition. Visitors to the site included His Excellency the American Ambassador, James Lacour, and his family.

The Team is working to translate the Conservancy's materials into Arabic so they can better share their resources. Noura, Alaa, and Dari are also currently advising them on beach clean-ups, sharing the lessons they've learned from the Mobile Clean-Up Unit and their work with Kuwaiti schools.

Training

Just as the Kuwait Dive Team never uses boats or diving for purely recreational purposes, most of their international travel includes some form of coral conservation work, often around training in salvage and rescue techniques. Sometimes they are the teachers; other times, the students. Members travelled to the Maldives to learn coral transplantation techniques in order to help them better care for their artificial reef garden. They have visited Oman to help lift a sunken vessel in that country's waters. At the invitation of the World Underwater Federation (CMAS), Team Members went cave diving in Palinuro, Italy – a first for many of them, as they encountered a natural barrier between fresh and salt water creating a unique ecosystem. Members have also visited Saudi Arabia to meet with diving groups and form additional partnerships in the region.

Through his trainer for the PADI instructor license, Dari is exploring a programme working with at-risk youth in Africa to do a crash course in diving that then works with those interested to help them become dive masters. Those who qualify gain a niche skillset highly marketable in the tourism industry. Through his work with



The Kuwait Dive Team formally joined the U.N. Global Compact in 2014.



The Kuwait Dive Team has many international partners. Here, the Team meets Project AWARE's leadership at their headquarters in the U.K.



In 2009, the Kuwait Dive Team received an NAUI Environmental Award at the DEMA Dive Show.



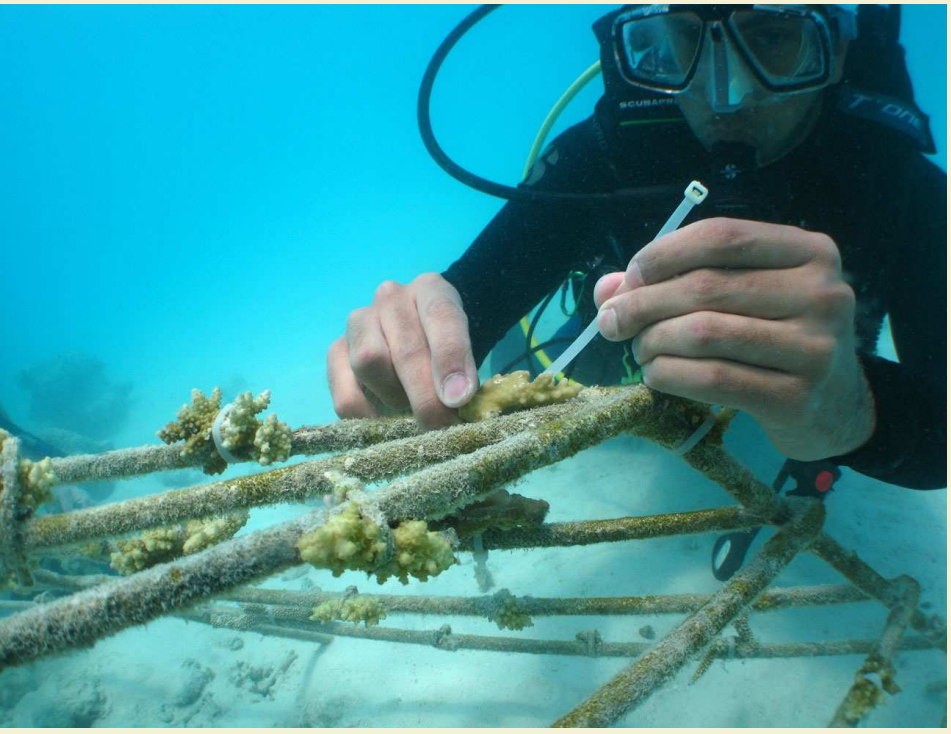
The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) presented the Dive Team an Environmental Leadership Award.

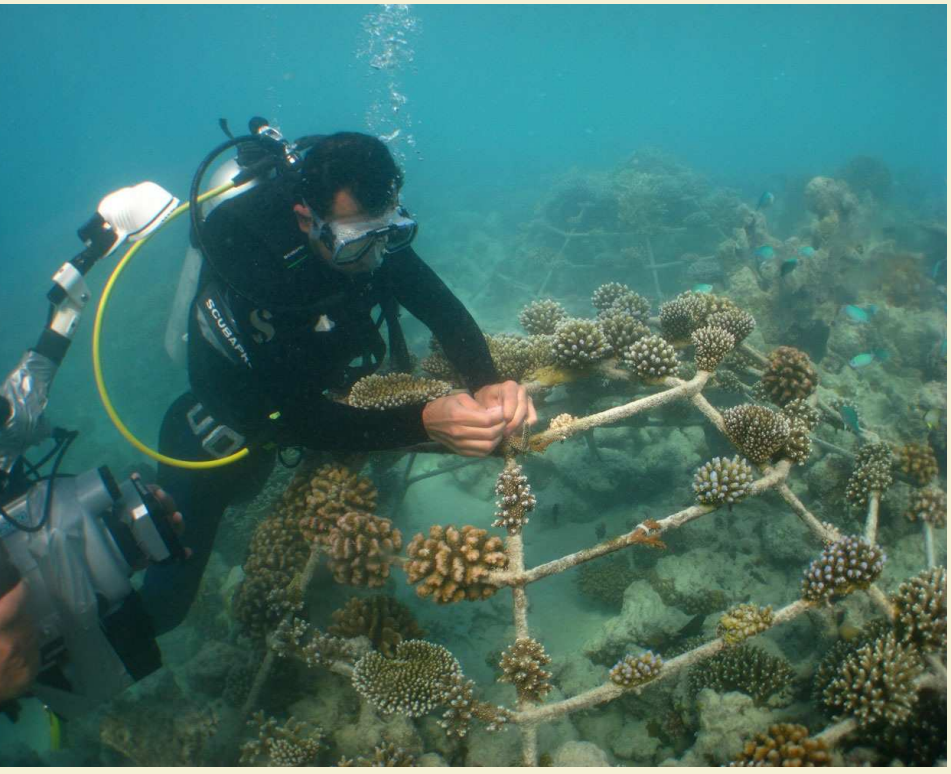
U.S. search and rescue teams, Dari has become close with the Kuwait military attaché in Washington, D.C. and their naval programmes. The Team is now exploring how citizens can better participate in search and rescue initiatives.

The London International Dive Show

The last night of my visit in Kuwait, Waleed calls to tell me I am "welcome anytime. You are like our sister, daughter, friend". Emailing with Dari about the book, he tells me I am now an honorary member of the Kuwait Dive Team. Their sincerity is made clear as I wake up the morning after landing back in London to a video from Waleed via WhatsApp. Sunday morning, I find a video of the bird lake that has now been successfully dug. Monday, it was a link to an English article in the Kuwait national news about the lake's opening. Just a few weeks later, I received the invitation from Dari to attend the London International Dive Show as a representative of the Team.

And so Valentine's Day 2015 found me at the ExCeL London Exhibition and Convention Centre, swept very suddenly into the world of divers. Volunteers Waleed AlShatti and Naser AlDarweesh, along with Noura, joined me in the UK





During a trip to the Maldives, the Kuwait Dive Team successfully experimented with coral reef cultivation. Coral saplings were placed on spider-like bodies modified by natural substances matching marine ecosystems in order to spur the growth of reef habitats.

to share the Team's message and meet with other groups. I gave a speech at the Show's Ocean Auditorium about the Team's work and called attendees to join them in environmental conservation. In the Scuba Youth Zone, Noura and I led a version of the Mobile Beach Clean-Up Unit's net game for young attendees, teaching students about the dangers of pollution in the water and rescue techniques for marine animals. We forged new partnerships with a variety of local organisations, including Deptherapy, a group using diving for veterans' rehabilitation. A friend of mine in London is now volunteering with them as a direct result. Given the level of interest at the Show, the Kuwait Dive Team is considering the feasibility of hosting 'voluntourism' trips for divers to come explore their activities, receive training in salvage techniques, and help with a few operations.

International Awards

Waleed and Naser brought trophies and Kuwait Dive Team resource packs about conservation diving to the London International Dive Show. Throughout the weekend, the four of us explored the other stands and identified organisations focused on volunteering, environmentalism and rescue. We presented our gratitude awards to these 'brother and sister' organisations as a sign of our appreciation for their efforts and a first step in further partnership.

The recognition does not go only one way. During its twenty-five years, the Kuwait Dive Team has been awarded by various organisations around the world. These honours are a boost to Team morale, but more importantly, they serve as another way for the members to spread their message.

In 2009, the National Association of Underwater Instructors awarded their Environmental Enrichment Award to the Team. The Award was created in 1992 and recognises individuals and organisations for work that has improved the aquatic environment, provided significant protection for the aquatic environment, or educated and inspired others to protect and conserve the aquatic environment. Members have now travelled to the United States to receive the Award twice, meeting with members of the Association each time. The Team remains in contact with NAUI, reporting on its activities and the state of corals in Kuwait.





Team members tested their skills by cave diving in Palinuro, Italy.

In Morocco, the Team became a laureate of the Award of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for Environmental Management. The Team's research work was recognised by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization for "Pilot applied research in environmental management in non-governmental organization that can be replicated in the Arab region". Team Members also visited the Hurghada International Dive Festival in Egypt to be recognised for their efforts.

More recently, the Team is trying to expand their rescue efforts from turtles, sharks, and other marine animals to include humans. As part of these efforts, a few Dive Team members travelled to the USA to meet with the Dive Rescue Team and celebrate their Middle River Volunteer Ambulance and Rescue efforts.

Hosting Events

After several years of attending dive shows, environmental conferences and awards ceremonies, the Kuwait Dive Team decided it was their turn to organise. They began fairly locally, leveraging their expertise and passion for regional cooperation. Their parent organisation, the Environmental Voluntary Foundation, held a three-day conference in Kuwait's largest convention centre on "Volunteers of Kuwait" to promote community service. The event served to bridge the Team's environmental conservation work with other volunteering initiatives around the area. The Gulf Cooperating Countries (GCC) Summit for Environmental Divers, also hosted by the Team, brought conservation groups to





The Kuwait Dive Team participated in TEDxSharq, Kuwait's first TEDx event.

Kuwait for a two-day workshop that included didactic presentations by each organisation and sessions in the training pool during which groups taught each other their specialised techniques.

Now, the Team is working to put on their first major overseas event, the Inaugural Summit of the Global Environmental Guardians Network (GEGN). The GEGN is an initiative of the Kuwait Dive Team working toward a worldwide umbrella organisation of diving conservation groups. The Team is hopeful that this first event will serve as a catalyst for further collaboration between like-minded groups and better connect environmental volunteers around the world.

Growing Roots and Spreading Branches

I have now taken on the title of International Cultural Consultant and Dari is the official International Relations Officer, but we are far from the only members of the Kuwait Dive Team dedicated to carrying their message further. When I asked Hamad Bouresly what one thing he would change about the Team, his immediate response was a desire to "have more operations in the world, not just Kuwait". His vision for the Dive Team is to grow strong roots in Kuwait and the Middle East, and then spread internationally. "That is what I'm going to do". The Kuwait Dive Team is, of course, just a small group of people battling against a strong culture – locally and globally – of consumption and environmental degradation. But as their work helps inform some two hundred students a week, thousands more at exhibits and book fairs, and even more through the Team's



The Kuwait Dive Team works with international partners like CNN to enhance their impact and share their story.

international efforts, Kuwait's future – and our own – may well be more sustainable than we assume. At the very least, the country is being supplied with a steady stream of people more knowledgeable about marine ecosystems, more experienced in volunteerism, and more globally aware than it has ever had before. With Captains Hamad and Yousif at the wheel, the Dive Team may just reshape what it means to be Kuwaiti.



Join the Kuwait Dive Team in Environmental Volunteerism

The Kuwait Dive Team hopes you have enjoyed reading about them. Even more so, the Team hopes you have been inspired by their work and will choose to join them. Wherever you are in the world, you can be an honorary member of the Kuwait Dive Team by engaging in environmental volunteerism. The nature of our environment means that rubbish thrown into the Thames in London can hurt the air in Brazil. Cutting down trees in New York can impact fish in Australia. The volunteers of the Kuwait Dive Team know just how devastating environmental neglect can be to our lives – but they also know how incredible it is when people join together to make things better. You don't have to live near an ocean

or be an expert diver to be a part of the Kuwait Dive Team's vision; you simply have to care about the environment and take action to help make our world a cleaner and safer place. So get out there!

Volunteering Opportunities

If you live near a beach, go clean it! Spend a few hours of your Saturday with a few friends picking up litter. It's a great way to spend some time in a beautiful place doing something relaxing but positive. While you're there, talk with your kids about the animals and plants that live in and around the water and why they're so important to protect. The Kuwait Dive Team would be happy to share their activity books: We have resources in both Arabic and English about marine creatures, the importance of oceans to our planet, and the dangers of litter.

But environmentalism doesn't just happen in the water. You can spend time in a local park, on the sides of the highway, or even in your own backyard. Today, the Kuwait Dive Team is a registered association with carefully organised operations. But it began as a small, informally gathered group of friends just trying to help out and have fun. You never know what you might start! Be sure to get in touch with your local parks service, environmental team, and city government for help, support, and to report your activities.

Partnerships

The Kuwait Dive Team is always interested in forming partnerships with other organisations around the world that share their goals. If you work in salvage operations, marine sustainability, or environmental volunteerism, please get in touch! The Team would be happy to share resources, ideas, and expertise. The Kuwait Dive Team is also looking to organise additional international conferences, workshops, and visits.

Press

If you have been inspired by this story and would like to help spread the Kuwait Dive Team's message, please be in contact. The Kuwait Dive Team is always looking to share their story with new audiences. The Team is happy to provide additional stories and photos, do interviews, and send along additional resources for your community, blog, newspaper, etc. Journalists are welcome to come see the Team's work in action. Contact the Team to arrange a visit.

Get in Touch

Follow the Kuwait Dive Team on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, and YouTube for updates on their activities and more amazing photos of and stories about the Gulf's incredible marine life.

If you would like to discuss a partnership, organise a visit, or get more information, contact the Team via their website or one of the phone numbers below. You can also get in touch with Author and International Cultural Consultant Becca Farnum at rebeccalfarnum.com.

www.freekuwait.com.kw

Kuwait Dive Team

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KUWAIT DIVE TEAM
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On Christmas Day in 1991, the Government of Kuwait formally accepted an offer from a group of young scuba divers to help remove underwater debris left by the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait. What began as a patriotic act of post-conflict rebuilding grew into a national movement for marine conservation and environmental volunteering.

This is the story of those volunteers, young Kuwaitis dedicated to preserving and protecting the rich resources and natural beauty offered by our planet's waters. Today, the organisation holds hundreds of beach clean-ups each year, salvages thousands of tons of boats and fishing nets from Kuwait Bay, and creates a safe haven for millions of animals in the Gulf.

This book invites you to take a journey with the Environmental Voluntary Foundation. It is a story of life and death, capture and rescue, wreck and restoration. It is a story meant to show you a different Middle East than you know. It is the story of the Kuwait Dive Team.

