



## feature



Opposite page: This shot of the coral reefs surrounding the Turks & Caicos reminds us of why we need to care about our oceans. Above: *Ocean Country* author Liz Cunningham takes a look at a sea turtle hatchling being cared for by Eigllys Trejo during one of Liz's many visits to the Turks & Caicos Islands. Her "turtle encounter" is described in the book.

# Ocean Country

Quest to save the seas starts in the Turks & Caicos Islands

Excerpts By Liz Cunningham

Liz Cunningham's new book, *Ocean Country* holds a special place in my heart. The focus of the book is how people around the world are practicing "hope in action," and why it's time for all of us to join them. It describes Liz's two year global journey to discover how communities and individuals are fighting to save the marine world that every living being depends on.

I met Liz four years ago when she was on her first trip back to the Turks & Caicos Islands since 1991 — a visit which spurred the creation of this groundbreaking book. Liz contributed a beautiful, lyrical piece entitled "Simple Truths" for the Fall 2011 issue of *Times of the Islands*, along with a second piece, "A Mosaic of Life" for the Winter 2012/13 issue. We've kept in touch, and I am honored to have witnessed the conception and birth of *Ocean Country*. I hope the excerpts printed here encourage you to read the entire book: it is an adventure story, poetic meditation, and, most importantly, a call to action.

Kathy Borsuk

In this excerpt from Chapter 1, “Beauty,” Liz is returning to the Turks & Caicos Islands “the place where I’d fallen in love with the undersea world,” after spending 12 years recovering from a kayak accident and other health problems.

The next day, our boat motored to the Northwest Point—nicknamed “the Point”—where the violet blue of the Atlantic trench almost touches the island. The number of buildings slowly thinned until there was practically no sign of civilization, and the shoreline was just a narrow slice of green jungle. A tern hovered above the bow. A school of flying fish darted across the water’s surface.

My dive buddy that day was a woman from Paris. She explained to me in broken English that she would need a few moments in the water to get used to her gear, as she had not been diving for several months. “I will need the moment,” she said, “to recover my sensations.”

I smiled. Who could have said it better?

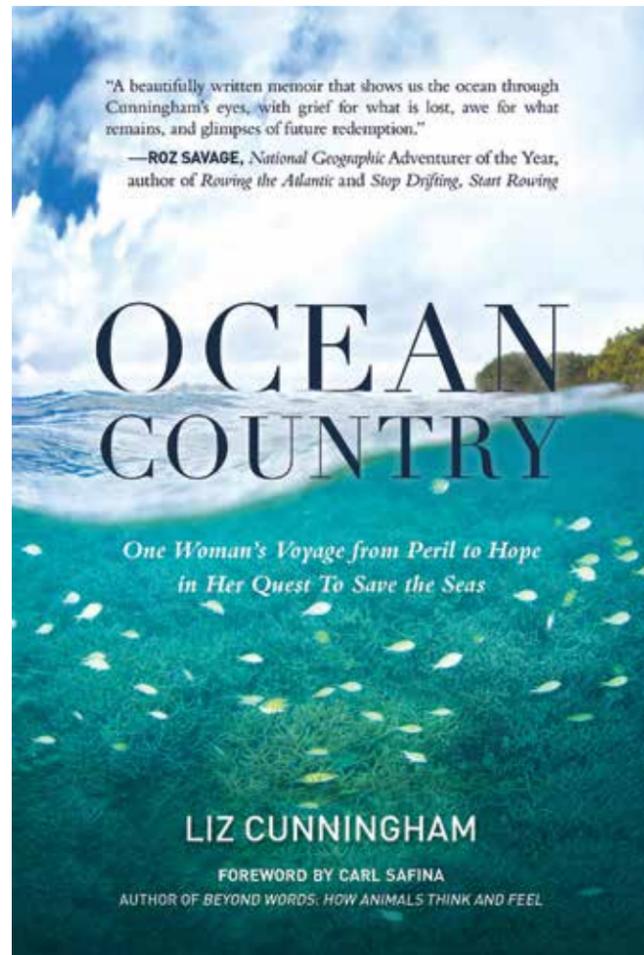
After jumping in the water and finding our equilibrium as “weightless aquatic mammals,” we swam to what was called the “wall,” where the reef descended to the continental shelf. Then, with a long outbreath, we sank in silence into that luminous, deep blue.

Once we were a hundred or so feet deep, something changed, as if we’d let go of *terra firma* and its last vestigial remnant, the water’s surface, and abandoned ourselves to the open, watery realm. Its sensations were at once foreign and yet hauntingly familiar; it seemed to wake profound, archaic memories.

We descended through a narrow, vertical corridor of coral like the fluted vault of a cathedral. It was filled with thousands of tiny silvery fish—silversides. The beauty was overwhelming. For a moment, my body felt like a tuning fork; the beauty was so resonant that it reverberated through my breath and bones.

As we descended, the life of the reef changed every ten feet or so, the shape of the coral becoming wider until, at close to 130 feet, they were wide platters, expanding to collect as much light as possible, like solar panels, in the darkening depths.

To the east, the ocean went on for thousands of miles—next stop, North Africa. Just the open sea and the life for which it was home. We hovered weightless over a large knob of plate coral. Below us were thousands of feet of water. The reef wall receded with undulating arcs that reminded me of pen-and-ink Chinese landscapes in which mountains fade in successive layers into almost infinite distances. With each curve, the coral wall became more



opaque, but seemed to go on forever.

A small dot appeared in the blue depths to the east. It got larger. It had fins, thick ones. Now I saw a roundish head and wide paddle-shaped front fins propelling an oval shell with the grace of a long-distance swimmer. It was nearly two yards long, with a short, stubby tail—a female green sea turtle. Migrating thousands of miles, they always return to the beach where they were born to lay their eggs.

We followed her up to shallower waters and lingered at about sixty feet as she slowly ascended to the surface to take a breath, her body a silhouette in the bright blue waters.

Each coral head was covered with clusters of fish nibbling and chasing and darting in and out of intricate tunnels and archways. A mosaic of shapes flashed in the distance. It was a school of horse-eye jacks. As we got closer, they did look horse-eyed, their eyes bulging out of their silvery bodies. Every few minutes the school would quiver and reorchestrate itself into a new shimmering shape.

The beauty of the undersea world was not just the beauty of seeing, it was also being seen. Hovering in

the midst of the jacks, with their alert but calm gazes, I sensed them allowing me to just be in their midst.

There were damselfish and grunts and snapper. Gobies. Octopuses. Angelfish. Trunkfish. Pufferfish. Butterflyfish. Trumpetfish. There was no way to grasp it all.

At the end of our dive, we ascended slowly to about fifteen feet and floated peacefully near the boat. We would stay there for a little over three minutes, doing what’s called a “safety stop.” A grouper with puffy cheeks and bulging round eyes hovered beneath the boat. The water was dotted with hundreds of yellow grunts. My whole body was smiling. Diving opened up so many unexpected worlds for me, not just the ocean, but also my own body and how my breath was connected to the world as a whole.

Six months later, Liz returns to the Turks & Caicos Islands. On this visit, she hopes to spend some time writing and painting, in the hopes of using the “tools of my trade” in service of ocean conservation. It was 42 days into the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico and the resulting oil spill. Liz, like most people, was reeling with the staggering implications of the spill to both the local environment of the Gulf Coast and the world’s oceans as a whole. The following are a series of excerpts from Chapter 2, “A Body Within a Body.”

As the plane flew south, my eyes went back and forth between a newspaper and the blue-green swirls of water and lace-like strips of land that formed the Bahamian archipelago. The newspaper had photos from the oil spill that were so disheartening that I had almost put the newspaper in a trash can in Miami.

I turned the pages slowly and allowed the images to reach out to me: a sea bird mired in oil, its beak and eyes barely visible; a dead sea turtle suffocated in a wetland blackened by oil; the hands of a Louisiana coastal zone director, holding up a handful of oil that dripped in long elastic strands. The oil was as thick as rubber cement.

A flight attendant swished by, grabbing the last cups before landing. The plane made a gentle arc over the islands, which sparkled like silvery-green sardines in the turquoise sea. Just before the plane touched down in Providenciales, a flock of birds took flight over Chalk Sound. The water glistened through the flutter of their wings. I sighed. I was so happy to be back. It felt like I was breaking a fast.



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**Liz travels to the School for Field Studies field station in South Caicos, where she is met by Lizzie, an intern there, and Eva, one of the professors.**

The next day we motored out to Long Cay. The outboard carved a path through radiant turquoise flats that stretched as far as we could see. Long Cay was a sliver of an island covered with mangroves. The staff wanted to do some surveys before bringing their students there.

As we geared up, I reached for my hood.

“What are you wearing that for?” Lizzie teased me.

“It keeps the hair out of my face.”

Lizzie looked at Eva with a wink. Eva smiled. “Liz, this isn’t Club Med.” Lizzie showed me how she wrapped a bandana around her head to keep her hair back. “Don’t worry, you’ll get there. You’ll be a fish dweeb by the time you leave.”

We hopped into the water. “The mangroves,” Eva explained, adjusting her snorkel, “are nurseries for juvenile fish. You might see some when you are snorkeling.” I’d seen mangroves many times before and thought nothing of them; they seemed like scruffy bushes. But now I was primed to pay attention.

The roots of the mangroves arced above the water and then descended vertically. The reflections of their leaves flickered on the surface, casting a deep-green hue. I peered underwater into the labyrinthine root system: hundreds of baby fish hovered skittishly.

It was like a “fish kindergarten” or an incubator—the roots formed mazelike bassinets or cradles that protected the young fish from larger predators. Those miles of milky blue-green flats that the two-prop plane had flown over were dense with mangroves and seagrass, nurseries for millions of juvenile fish.

I stood up and pulled my mask off.

“Nice, huh?” said Lizzie. “The juveniles, they feed on plankton until they grow large enough to go out on the reef.”

“And plankton are ...?” I didn’t really know what plankton was.

“Organisms that drift in the current. Some are microscopic, others are big, like jellyfish.”

“What kind of fish?”

Lizzie smiled. The partial list: angelfish, grouper, grunts, snapper.

“Liz!” Eva called out. She was carefully holding a sea urchin in her hands. Its spines were sharp. “Just touch it very gently.”

I felt one of the smooth spines quiver. Urchins have

light-sensitive molecules in their spines, similar to the photoreceptors in our eyes. Researchers speculate that they may “see”—as in “detect shapes of light”—with the whole surface of their body.

On the way back from Long Cay, we snorkeled at an island called HDL just across from the field station. It was a striking outcropping of stone. It seemed a contradiction that such a beautiful island would be named HDL. But scientists do have very dry wits. Maybe HDL was named the way a ravishingly beautiful woman named Joanna might be nicknamed Joe.

HDL teemed with juvenile fish too. May and June were “juvenile season”—swarms of tiny fish filled the water. Sometimes adult fish would circle and nip each other and then leave behind a plume of eggs and sperm. After the eggs hatch, the new larvae then drift in the currents and find safe havens in the mangroves and the seagrass.

**That night, a storm hit South Caicos. It affected Liz deeply.**

A blast of wind roared in off the open water, and the rain pelted down.

*God, I feel like I'm on another planet.*

The field station’s generator was turned off at night, so there were no lights. It was pitch black. At the edge of the island we were in the thick of the roaring wind and rain and tides.

But maybe it’s this—that I’m finally feeling this planet.

In the months before, I’d pored over books about the ocean. Over 70 percent of the planet’s surface is covered by water; 96 percent of all the water on earth is in the oceans. The earth is essentially an aquarium-terrarium. And the health of the water is in decline. The cultural revelation was slow and painful. It is easy to understand a pond or a river being poisoned—like the pollutants in the Hudson of my childhood. But for many, the ocean seems too big to be polluted in the same way. But it’s not, and just like goldfish, sea creatures need healthy water to survive. And there is no other planet we can race to with a siphon to perform an emergency water change.

The wind whipped up stronger, thrashing through coconut trees. I remembered a NASA visualization of the currents in the Atlantic, swirls of currents and micro-currents, seas and subseas, all intermixing—each body of water flowing into its neighbors. And in those seas? Countless whales and turtles and sharks and tuna, riding the currents—their “second body”—from the Azores

and North Africa to the Caribbean and northward to Newfoundland.

My heart beat and my blood pulsed through my arms and hands. A fact was surfacing as a sensation: I too was a body within a body. And a body of water at that. Our blood is 92 percent water, our brain and muscles, 75 percent. And all that water moves and moves—circulation. That night it was wildly tangible, as real as the zipper on my mozi net, as the rain pelted down, as the salty wind blowing through like some long-forgotten memory of our origins.

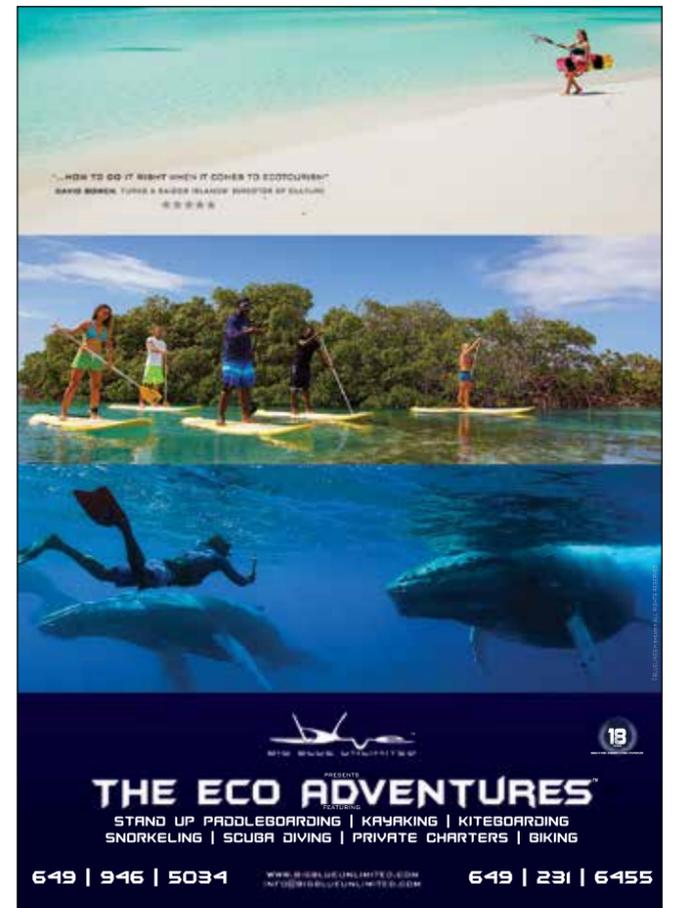
**It was a year later, and another trip to the Islands, that spurred Liz to her own “call to action,” in the form of writing *Ocean Country*, then traveling to promote the book and her message of “hope in action.” In these excerpts from Chapter 4, “The Truths of the Islands,” Liz goes diving on a Grace Bay site called Boneyard and experiences an episode of coral bleaching that took place during June 2012, a month which had the all-time warmest surface temperatures (of both land and sea) for June in the Northern hemisphere.**

I sat on the upper deck and remembered this spot from the week before. It was a series of deep sand channels, densely populated with coral. The finger coral were shaped like protruding stubby thumbs, and the large staghorn coral like the antlers of a deer. Hence its name, Boneyard.

Each cluster of coral had between twenty and a hundred finger coral and staghorn coral colonies, densely packed together. It was sometimes hard to even see the coral, because the schools of yellow grunts were so thick. There were hundreds of parrotfish in all kinds of colors—maroon and turquoise with magenta and yellow and deep blue markings—as well as damselfish and hamlets and grouper and neon-yellow trumpetfish. Turtles. Spotted rays. Sharks. As we motored out, I remember thinking that the waters of Grace Bay and the Point were the most deeply alive place I had ever experienced.

The boat slowed. One of the divemasters used a long pole to moor on to a buoy. “Okay kiddo, get in the water,” the divemaster said as he spot-checked my gear. I put the heel of my hand to my mask to keep it in place and took one long step off the edge of the back of the boat and into that world I so deeply cherished.

I exhaled and sank softly into the water. I closed my eyes for a few seconds to just feel the water river along my body.



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Jeez, it's warm.

I looked at my dive computer: 82 degrees Fahrenheit. I turned horizontal as I sank and looked down at the site, about forty feet below.

Where am I?

It was almost unrecognizable. The sand channels were there, but hardly a sign of life. Everywhere the coral was white and brown, with green-brown algae growing over it. There were a few small clusters of fish and an occasional lone fish, looking out of place. The coral had bleached.

I paused at a bed of staghorn coral. The week before, it had been filled with so many juvenile parrotfish and blue chromis that the water appeared to be filled with the "snow" I had described to Lizzie. Tiny brown-and-white damselfish and bright-yellow conies had cautiously peered out from the shelter of the staghorn coral's antler-like structure. Small multicolored fish had darted mischievously, sometimes chasing each other, or had nibbled on a piece of coral, nestled in the safety of its tight matrix.

Now it was barren and whitish-gray, save for one oval blue tang that nibbled on the algae overgrowth. The other divers and I searched fruitlessly for a spot that might not be so damaged.

As I moved my fins slowly through the water, it felt as if I swam through the ashen remnants of a bombed-out cathedral. Each spot I remembered being deeply alive and illuminated with life. The mosaic of color was gone, only a white-brown monotone structure remaining, covered with algae. What was once brilliant was now muted and withered; what had shimmered was now grayed out; iridescent, now bleak and barren.

How could this happen in less than a week's time?

The devastation was unmistakable. We swam through a landscape of millions upon millions of near-microscopic animals, ailing and dead, unable to support the multitude of life forms they once did. I paused at a yard-wide knob of brain coral. The week before, small black-and-white gobies had sped across its Aztec-like patterns. Next to it had been some bright magenta sea fans. A large school of yellow-and-silvery-white schoolmaster fish had hovered there.

The schoolmasters were gone. The sea fans were tattered, with a blackish overgrowth. Almost all of the brain coral was covered with algae. A small portion of the coral's zigzag structure was visible, but it was a dark brown and white.

A French physician watched as I took a photograph of

the brain coral. He looked at me with moribund eyes and then slowly ran his index finger across his throat from ear to ear, mimicking the slice of a guillotine. I opened the palms of my hands as if to say, "I'm not sure."

Before getting back on the boat, I keep looking down to the reef. I still couldn't quite believe it. It was incomprehensible.

**The next day, John Walch, from the Reef Ball Foundation, and local marine ecologist Marsha Pardee explain to Liz the bleaching phenomenon.**

Bleaching happens when the coral, reacting to environmental stresses, expels beneficial algae, with which it has a symbiotic relationship. "The coral basically gets sick and throws up the algae," John said, "just like when a person is ill and expels the contents of his or her stomach."

This type of algae is different from the type that feeds on nutrient runoff and damages coral. The coral gets its nourishment from this algae's ability to make energy from light, photosynthesis. And it gets its green and rose and yellow hues from the algae's color. When it expels the algae, it loses its color and turns white. It can survive for a while without the algae, but not too long, and not if coral disease and algae overgrowth become predominant.

When coral bleaches, the fish leave, looking for healthier terrain. How far they go or where, scientists don't really know. John explained that if the temperature change had happened more slowly, in weeks rather than two or three days, the coral might have tolerated it. "Corals and marine organisms have evolved in the most stable environment in the world. They have no built-in mechanisms for rapid change. They can take change, but if we go too fast, that's where the problem is." The four-degree spike in temperature in less than a week is what the coral couldn't tolerate.

Marsha cleared her throat. "Take a cockroach in my kitchen. It can go through fifteen different insecticides in a year and get used to them all. Coral can't; they don't have the ability to make that rapid a change."

"There's no silver bullet," John said. "Everyone wants a silver bullet." Ocean ecosystems are so interconnected; you can't just cordon off a portion and preserve it like a pickle in a jar. Saving coral reefs isn't just about saving coral reefs. Their decline is about the quality of our water and the air we breathe. The damage I saw was a sign of massive destruction around the globe that was devastating fisheries, creating extreme droughts and storms, and



CHARLIE COSTELLO

Liz Cunningham and her husband Charlie spent a week on a boat on the Silver Banks, just south of the Turks & Caicos, where Charlie captured this awesome photo of a humpback whale breaching.

polluting our waterways. The silver bullet would have to be a multitude of bullets: stopping overfishing, instituting proper sewage treatment, and limiting nutrient runoff and carbon dioxide emissions.

In the Caribbean, scientists had documented an 80 percent loss of hard coral over the last three decades. The problems are so massive and so in need of international coordination that paralysis is often the reaction. What's needed? A vast collectivity of changes, equivalent to the damage that we've been inflicting. The possibility of change is in proportion to how many of us are willing to act. Think of slavery several hundred years ago. How ubiquitous was that? End slavery? A four-thousand-year-old tradition that was the very fiber of the economy? An elite class's grip on power?

Change came about because many people protested and voted and signed petitions and lobbied decision makers. Not to mention the courageous and steadfast souls who refused to be muzzled, risked death and imprisonment, and became the voice of generations. "Change," the social-justice activist Tom Hayden wrote, "begins in the individual lives of countless people when they no longer accept existing conditions as inevitable."

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Some of the most important tasks for ocean conservation would be to convince decision makers to do something about climate change, overfishing, and water quality. Of course, that pressure is often rebuffed with, "Oh now, that's going to be really complicated! And the economic fallout would be devastating." Just like a slave owner thinking how complicated it would be to run a plantation without slave labor. Okay, it's complicated. But more complicated than arctic oil drilling or fracking or fishing boats that drag 55-mile-long drift nets at sea?

**The rest of *Ocean Country* details Liz's research on the California coast, Sulawesi and West Papua, France and the Mediterranean Sea. She documents the work of many people who are rescuing the life of the seas and affecting real change — one small step at a time.**

***Ocean Country* closes with a trip to the Silver Banks just south of the Turks & Caicos that Liz shared with her husband Charlie. Here, thousands of humpback whales breed and give birth every winter before migrating north to feed in the summer.**

Toward the end of the day, we cautiously approached a mother and calf. The driver deftly maneuvered the boat as we timed their breaths. Then they surfaced together once more, exhaled with muffled bursts, and descended like a submarine and its companion submersible.

"Okay," said Gene. "Let's give this a try." We slipped into the water. The mother was resting motionless at about sixty feet, and the calf had nuzzled itself right beneath her chin with the sleepy-eyed, soft-mouthed expression of a baby in a cradle. The water was suffused with peacefulness and an unthinkable energy I was at a loss to name.

Every few minutes, the calf stirred and rose, as if swimming in its sleep, outstretching its newborn fins in slow motion to propel itself to the surface and take a breath. Then it sank, tiptoeing back to bed in a trance-like slumber, and tucked itself under its mother's chin.

We floated like a loose-knit blob of jellyfish, gawking silently. There was just an hour or so of daylight left; the light cast angular, silvery threads through the darkening, violet-blue water. Once again the calf raised its head and slipped out from under its mother's chin. But this time it seemed to wake out of its slumber.

As it rose, it turned vertically in the water, revealing the soft-looking pleats beneath its throat and belly. "When a whale turns its belly toward you," Gene had told

us, "it's actually positioning itself so it can see you with both eyes." The calf spread its fins, took a breath of air, and began to swim horizontally, bobbing just below the surface. The mother started to rise, steady as a slow-moving barge.

They both inched toward me, side by side, and eyed us curiously. Soon their heads were just a few feet away. The calf wobbled in the sea surge, its fins spread like the wings of a fledging sparrow. Right behind it was the mother's long head. Her eye, big as an apple, was filled with steady confidence and warmth.

"Bury me here," I mused. "When I die, bring my ashes to a moment like this and scatter them."

My god! I've never thought that before! What's got me by the throat?

It was so clear it seemed silly that I hadn't seen it before. That unthinkable energy that I was at a loss to name? It was power. Unthinkably massive power married to ... kindness. Forty tons of constant, attentive, steadfast care.

"Mummy" could break our necks with a casual flick of one of her fins. Our boat, half her size, wouldn't survive a breach on top of it.

But what was she doing? Gently approaching, careful that her fins didn't hit anyone, and slowly, as if trying not to startle us. Soon she would migrate north, navigate threats of ship strikes and fishing-gear entanglement and orcas attacking her calf. Despite all the changes in the seas that we have wrought, she would guide her calf north. She would forge on ahead.

The calf turned slowly, as if on a spindle, and eyed us playfully. The pleats on its belly were unscarred, like the porcelain skin of a newborn baby. The mother calmly looked on. Our search was over. They were finding us now. \*

*Liz Cunningham is currently touring to promote the book and raise awareness on climate change and water quality. Twenty-one percent of royalties will be given to the New England Aquarium's Marine Conservation Action Fund (MCAF), which aims to protect and promote ocean biodiversity through funding of small-scale, time-sensitive, community-based programs.*

*The book is available on-island at the Unicorn Bookstore, through Amazon.com, and more than likely, at your favorite bookstore or library. For more information or to order the book, visit [http://lizcunningham.net/ocean\\_country\\_the\\_book/](http://lizcunningham.net/ocean_country_the_book/).*

## Book review

Okay, I admit it. It's really a treat to be able to read a book about a place you have lived and to be able to count among your friends most of the people described within the pages. I am also fortunate to know and have dived with the author after we met to discuss ways in which she could help support the Turks & Caicos Reef Fund.

Not many people would change their way of thinking, doing, and being to try and save the very thing that nearly killed them. Especially when that something is as all-encompassing as our oceans. This is not a simple "save the dog that bit me" exercise. *Ocean Country* is Liz Cunningham's very personal journey which begins with a near fatal kayaking accident, her revisiting the scene, and her overcoming her fear of the ocean. Instead, she dives headfirst — quite literally — into just how poorly humanity is treating our planet and how this behavior is killing the very thing that is responsible for life on Earth. It is a travelogue of sorts detailing her journey across the globe to observe and record firsthand what mankind has done to its home.

Liz has a remarkable clarity of style which makes the book very easy reading, and a delightful read at that — considering the topic. It is an intensely personal story and she brings you into her head from the very first page. She compares her reluctance, acceptance, and ultimate enthusiasm to write *Ocean Country* with her first experience driving a motor bike. What this has to do with ocean conservation is not too clear until Liz connects the dots for you and the analogy is brilliant.

Liz has clearly researched her facts and figures, and presents them, not in a dull regurgitation of numbers way, but to drive the point home with such clarity as to make the reader stop and take note. Thirty-six percent of the Federal fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico were closed after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. How awful. That's over eighty-six thousand square miles of ocean. Yeah, that's a lot of ocean. Then she hits it home: That's an area the size of Minnesota. Whoa! That's huge!

What should have been a depressing book about the horrible way humans have mistreated our planet and seem hell-bent to destroy our oceans is anything but. Liz's unbridled passion is clearly obvious and leaves the reader thinking that there IS light at the end of the tunnel. And it doesn't have to be a train. It's hope.

*David Stone, co-founder, Turks & Caicos Reef Fund*