

Q+A

Connections in conservation



The International SeaKeepers Society (ISS) now has a presence in the South Pacific. **Jeni Bone** speaks with Program Development Manager **Melissa White** about her role, which focuses on both community and industry engagement to support marine-science projects in the region.

Melissa White is the not-so-new kid on the block. Representing SeaKeepers in the South Pacific, she links vessels with scientists undertaking research and educators looking to provide learning experiences about the marine environment, out on the water.

Based in New Zealand's Bay of Plenty, White is the Program Development Manager (South Pacific) for the global charitable organisation founded in 1998 by yacht owners to support science and conservation. With her unique skill set of marine-biology qualifications and a decade crewing on board yachts in the Caribbean and South Pacific, it's as if the role was created especially for her.

Below: Partnering with yachts means scientists can go further offshore and study marine species like oceanic mantas.

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Hailing from Texas, White grew up on a lake and always felt a connection to the water – so much so that she discontinued her medical studies and transferred to marine biology instead, which she studied at the University of the Virgin Islands, surrounded by the marine marvels and cruising grounds of the Caribbean.

After graduating, White secured jobs on various yachts, working as a

deckhand and dive master, and sharing her knowledge and passion for the marine environment and conservation. She worked aboard private and charter vessels, exploring the South Pacific – Fiji, French Polynesia, Australia, New Zealand, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu – as well as Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Japan. "I fell in love with the South Pacific," she says, recounting the decade of yachting experience in the region, most notably aboard the 59-metre explorer yacht *Sea Wolf*. She also fell in love and married her husband Sam, a Kiwi, and they decided to spend six months in the US and six months in New Zealand, following the sun.

In 2018, floating in the azure waters of the South Pacific, White made a social-media post about yachts being the ideal vessels for conducting science, and SeaKeepers reached out to her. "SeaKeepers saw an opportunity in the South Pacific, which is largely unexplored," she says. "It's harder to access, and there's much less scientific data. Yachts are ideally positioned to help scientists as they're already accessing these places, and crew are actively engaged in citizen science, taking photos and footage of marine life with their phones, drones and underwater cameras. This information could be huge for the scientific community."

But COVID halted their ambitions, and the couple ended up riding out the pandemic in New Zealand. "Toward the end, we both got jobs aboard the 57-metre *Dancing Hare*, which took us to Palau, before ending up back in the US." ➔



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Despite the interruption, White began working with SeaKeepers and, in March 2023, was appointed head of the organisation's satellite office in New Zealand, responsible for projects in the South Pacific.

"SeaKeepers' motto is research, educate, protect, and restore," she says. "We work on scientist-led expeditions, citizen-science programs, education and community engagement."

"In the South-Pacific region, it's no different – they are the mirror image of global projects but specific to our local marine environments. A major part of my role is linking yachts with the scientific and academic communities."

In 2024, White will be working to implement and support six official proposals, and many more are under consideration and in the pipeline. "We have projects in French Polynesia, New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, Indonesia and Micronesia," she says.

"For example, scientists have discovered a new species of coral in Moorea, and they want to extend the search to other areas throughout French Polynesia. We hope to link them to a yacht that has diving capacity and deck space on board so they can conduct their research in those areas."

In New Zealand, scientists studying the oceanic manta rays are only just discovering the unique behaviours of this enigmatic species. They're interested in tagging them and identifying new manta hotspots beyond Auckland waters. "These scientists are looking for a large vessel that will be able to take them further offshore for overnights," says White, "with a high tower on board for spotting mantas. The same goes for the orca scientists conducting groundbreaking research. Each proposal is unique."

The citizen-science aspect of SeaKeepers' role aims to tap into the cruising and passagemaking yachts already undertaking the Pacific milk run, as it has been termed, borrowing a World War II phrase for an easy mission.

"We're working on a plankton tow project with vessels travelling from New Zealand, Fiji, New Caledonia, Vanuatu and back to New Zealand because there's a huge data gap in this field and so many other areas of marine research, particularly in the South Pacific," she says.

Citizen science refers to the collection of data from members of the public, which is invaluable to researchers. "Crew and



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owners on yachts doing a crossing see so many things, and reporting the location and habits of wildlife is a huge asset to scientists," explains White.

In October, White travelled to Fort Lauderdale for the 25th anniversary of SeaKeepers, commemorated with the traditional Bal de la Mer, which was held on 25 October to coincide with the 2023 Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show.

There was no single SeaKeeper of the Year Award this year, as there had been since 1996. Instead, all the individuals recognised over the years were lauded and the organisation's 25 years were celebrated, with guests of honour Fabien Cousteau (2015 SeaKeeper of the Year), Amos Nachoum (2019 SeaKeeper of the Year), and yachting celebrity Captain Sandy Yawn from reality TV series *Below Deck Mediterranean*.

On her way back to New Zealand, White attended The Ocean Collective Summit in Singapore, a program initiated by the Asia chapter of SeaKeepers in cooperation with Fabien Cousteau, founder of the Fabien Cousteau Ocean Learning Centre and Proteus Ocean Group, and famed for his work as an oceanographic explorer and environmental advocate. "Asia is a lot more involved in education," says

Above: In one of many projects, the ISS team uses a Neuston net to collect plankton and microplastics samples.

White. "I'm focused on yachts and there is definitely some overlap – I'm hopeful I can initiate a lot more collaboration in our region next year."

White will also be advancing the SeaKeepers' partnerships with marinas in Australia. Already, two marinas – Coral Sea Marina and Gold Coast City Marina & Shipyard – are on board the SeaKeepers Marina Partner Program, which will raise awareness of the organisation's programs with visiting yachts and customers.

Visiting vessels are encouraged to sign up for the Discovery Yacht Program to participate in data collection and work with researchers on the range of projects specific to our waters.

Also on White's agenda is raising awareness of plastic pollution, and promoting an innovative solution that marinas and the yachting community can adopt. As she explains, "CRDC Global runs The Bag that Builds initiative, which provides owners, crew and marinas with recycled plastic bags to collect all kinds of plastic material, which is then converted into RESIN8 – an aggregate mixed with concrete and used by the construction industry," White says. "It's an effective way of closing the plastic loop."

With the aim of leveraging these marina partnerships, White will attend the 2024 Superyacht Rendezvous, followed by ASMEX and the Sanctuary Cove International Boat Show. "It's all about making connections within the industry," she says. "I'm so happy to be meeting new people and sharing resources; I've found the local industry to be energetic and committed to conservation."

To learn more about SeaKeepers' programming, visit seakeepers.org/discovery-yacht-program. seakeepers.org