

## Dive4Change Grant Awarded to Love A Sea Turtle

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Love A Sea Turtle

The Pitt County Youth Scuba Club participates in cleanup efforts.

For divers and water enthusiasts, protecting and preserving our aquatic resources is essential. To be enjoyed by future generations, aquatic habitats and wildlife must be sustainably managed. This requires a balanced approach to research, education, outreach, use and conservation efforts. Another key factor — and arguably the most essential — in sustaining these resources is engaging future generations in these efforts and instilling in them a sense of stewardship.

One organization that exemplifies this balanced approach to sustainability and youth engagement in aquatic resource management is Love A Sea Turtle (LAST), a charitable fund founded by Casey Sokolovic under the sponsorship of The Community Foundation of NC East, a 501(c)(3) organization based in North Carolina. In March, LAST was awarded a NAUI Green Diver Initiative (GDI) Dive4Change grant to support the Pitt County Youth Scuba Club.

In partnership with North Carolina NAUI affiliates Rum

Runner Dive Shop and Aquaventure, LAST established the Pitt County Youth Scuba Club to support its mission of promoting marine conservation awareness by engaging students in leadership development and environmental stewardship, inspiring others to get involved in year-round service projects and activities and providing nature-based summer programs for underserved youth.

LAST's mission closely aligns with that of GDI, which created the Dive4Change grant program to empower and support grass-roots conservation efforts made by divers within and just beyond their communities. Divers have a specific skill set that most people do not possess: certification to safely explore and study the underwater world. With as many as six million active certified divers around the world, this specialized community has the power to tackle aquatic environmental issues head on and hands on.

GDI strives to empower divers to explore, preserve and restore waterways. Divers are making a positive



Rum Runner Dive Shop

A Pitt County Youth Scuba Club diver

impact on the health of waterways — diving not only to observe and enjoy nature, but with a purpose. GDI values the enthusiasm and expertise divers bring as citizen scientists. The Dive4Change grant program provides much-needed support for individual divers and small groups to succeed, creating real change for the future of our aquatic planet. The Pitt County Youth Scuba Club provides the perfect example of how youth empowerment and education, environmental conservation, and scuba diving go hand in hand.

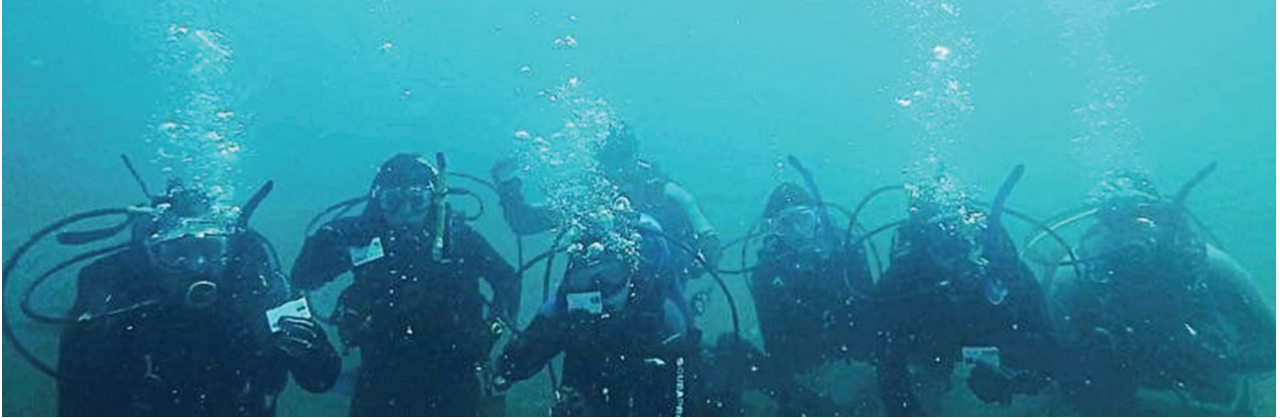
The following excerpts from LAST's Dive4Change grant application communicate an important gap in the demographic and socioeconomic reach of scuba diving, not only as a recreational activity but also as a valuable learning opportunity through which young people can develop important life and leadership skills, feel empowered, gain confidence, learn how to be better communicators and team members, and become environmental stewards:

“We have discovered a disproportionate representation of minorities in the scuba community and environmental conservation initiatives. This is due to a lack of access to diving facilities, family economic cost factors, lack of transportation, longstanding cultural biases and image stereotyping. Creating a new culture and new norm will take an investment of money, time and an entire

community committed to increasing minority divers and helping to reduce cultural stereotyping. The [purpose of the] formation of the Pitt County Youth Scuba program in the fall of 2015 was to intentionally and actively recruit and attract minority divers and interest others with the financial means and interest to join. It has been an inclusive club with tremendous success. Youth who otherwise might not have attempted this activity now serve as role models and serve to increase interest in the sciences, outdoor activities and involvement in environmental issues.

“Our vision and current solutions have been to promote diving, watersports skills, environmental awareness and conservation; develop hands-on educational service learning programs that will stimulate interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) subjects and outdoor activities; remove barriers for students who cannot afford to get into diving; provide pathways for those interested in studying marine and environmental sciences; conduct experiential and educational outdoor STEM-focused excursions and open-water experiences; serve as a model for scuba safety, training and technical information for the entire diving industry; and increase minority participation in scuba and reduce stereotypical notions in the dive community and environmentalism.

“With a focus on increasing the number of youth divers and a seven-year partnership with Rum Runner Dive



Rum Runner Dive Shop

The Pitt County Youth Scuba Club members receive their open-water dive certification cards.

Shop, a NAUI training center, we have been instrumental in increasing interest and youth opportunities in diving. Our region’s new state-of-the-art dive facility, the willingness of the Pitt County school system to help establish a countywide program, the proximity to a major university featuring maritime underwater archaeology as a flagship program, our ongoing commitment to youth involvement, and our sustainability are all positive features and strengths of this program. The growth of the program, with 32 new youth divers in our first year, coupled with a dedicated dive center, Aquaventure, has provided the impetus and evidence of need to increase our services and design specific youth programs.”

GDI and NAUI are proud to support LAST and the Pitt County Youth Scuba Club by awarding them a \$1,000 Dive4Change grant, which will contribute to the following initiatives:

- Marine entanglement education and underwater cleanup events;
- Community service awareness and engagement, with a focus on developing campaigns promoting Paint the Drain stormwater awareness and reducing the use of plastic bags in the local community; and
- Marine conservation symposiums focused on water-quality issues and aquatic resource conservation, as well as conservation leadership. LAST plans to expand on the current forum format of symposiums to incorporate speakers from the diving world and hands-on opportunities to engage students in environmental advocacy, protection of aquatic habitats and wildlife through scuba diving, and attending other aquatic conservation-based events.

NAUI members can expect to see and hear more in 2017 as NAUI moves to take a more active role in engaging youth in diving education and aquatic conservation. Stay tuned to the *Sources* Youth Engagement and GDI columns, where NAUI youth initiatives and training programs will be featured. If you would like to share your story or get involved, please contact Communications Coordinator Angie Cowan at [acowan@naui.org](mailto:acowan@naui.org).



Love A Sea Turtle



**You can contribute to the GDI Dive4Change grant program by visiting [green-diver-initiative.kindful.com](http://green-diver-initiative.kindful.com).**

Special thanks to LAST board member Daniel Sokolovic for his contributions to this article and his efforts in securing the Dive4Change grant. Contributions to LAST support sea turtle conservation and education. LAST’s scuba and educational outreach programs provide inspiration for students to get involved in environmental science and make a difference. All financial donations to LAST are 100 percent tax deductible. Love A Sea Turtle is a 501(c)(3) organization. Help them LAST – Love A Sea Turtle. Visit [loveaseaturtle.com](http://loveaseaturtle.com) to find out more and make a donation. Follow on Facebook ([facebook.com/pg/loveaseaturtle](https://facebook.com/pg/loveaseaturtle)), Twitter ([@helpthemlast](https://twitter.com/helpthemlast)) and Instagram ([@loveaseaturtle](https://instagram.com/loveaseaturtle)).