

The Island School Story

South Eleuthera in the Bahamas is undeniably beautiful. It also for many years, until recently, has had an air of decay, of crushed hopes, of abandonment about it. This tropical seascape had lost its tourism in the 70's and 80's; its fisheries, once so abundant, had been decimated by overfishing; its agriculture, always difficult, was ever more marginalized by unsustainable slash and burn techniques. Unemployment rates reached 80%.

Into this troubled paradise in 1998 came a gifted social entrepreneur and educator, Chris Maxey, and others with some radical ideas and The Island School was born. It was to be, and is now, a place above all of learning, but learning in a fundamentally different way than the normal classroom experience. This was to be, and is, experiential, or place-based education. Education with nature as its partner, with South Eleuthera its classroom. Math not by a book filled with numbers, but measuring angles from the dorms to the windmill. Science not by a beaker in a lab, but a trip to the reef, or the mangrove swamp, or the farm. Literature not the standard classics, but stories of the Bahamas and the Caribbean, of the local culture, of the neighbors and their history.

Daily life for the semester program, U.S. high school students who came and come to The Island School is also a jolt of change out of the blue. Recycling, conservation, living in harmony with nature are the watchwords and creed. All wastes are recycled – a beautiful, lush garden is the result where only scrub and sand stood before. The sun and the wind help power the campus, plenty for all its needs, but only enough for brief, “navy” showers. After all, the sea is right outside. Food is locally grown wherever possible. Physical activity is not a once-a-day

thing, but constant, beginning with daily exercise at 6:00 a.m. – a shock to the teenage body if there ever was one!

Well and good, one might say, but what exactly does a semester program for U.S. kids have to do with education for the globe, for those millions without adequate resources to learn. Here's where the story gets even more interesting and filled with hope for me. The Island School in 2001 gave birth to the Deep Creek Middle School, a school for the kids of the local settlement. Current enrollment is 36 7th through 9th graders. The curriculum in part is traditional, but there is a twist. The students participate in a 2 month Alternative Program that builds their knowledge of local history, geology and the environment. In other words, their education becomes place-based. Untethered from the classroom, a scuba-diving expedition becomes a lesson in physical science. A walk to the ocean teaches what has happened to their parents' and neighbors' jobs due to overfishing and what might be done about it. A visit to the Island School campus down the road leads to a thousand questions-What's solar power and how does it work? You mean to tell me that garden comes from what?! You mean you'd make me get up at 6:00 a.m. to run to the marina and back – no way!

A couple of specific examples might further illustrate the changes in the air down in Eleuthera. The collapse of the fisheries has caused the local population, in some way, to turn its back to the sea which betrayed them. The result – no swimming in this world of water. No longer- the joys of swimming have been rediscovered by the students at Deep Creek. The conch is a local treasure and conch fritters a local delicacy, but the conch is now rarer and highly vulnerable due to overharvesting. The Deep Creek students have become teachers for their parents, as they learn how to protect and enhance this precious resource as part of their science classes.

In five short years, the fruits of this place-based, hands-on learning are already rather remarkable. In 2005, the results of the required 9th grade tests placed Deep Creek in the top 15 schools in the country. Six students are attending high schools in the U.S. – on full scholarships. Applications for spots at Deep Creek are up each year despite the financial burden of a partial tuition contribution from an impoverished populace. There is talk and much clamor for a high school. The list of positives goes on.

What then are the lessons here? They are too numerous to fully explore in the few minutes left, but it's wonderful to try.

1. Living in harmony with nature and using nature's bounty of sun, wind and the sea creatively and sustainably is a life-changing educational message. What is education of course, but the means to create better lives, and place-based, experiential education is a powerful tool to do just that.

2. Education is at its most vital when it is hands-on, related to one's life experience and immediate in its impact. Students at The Island School and Deep Creek are enthralled to see their world change before their very eyes by their own efforts and passions.

3. Seeing technology in action - the solar panels, the windmills, the waste garden – fires the imagination in a way few other things can. Look at what this can do! Let's try this! Technology inspires creativity; it banishes hopelessness; it brings into tangible focus the world we all yearn for.

4. Finally, place-based education using technology in harmony with nature can be applied anywhere, any time if we can but see. The 10 year old by the sea learns about the ocean – not just its bounty but its fragility; the 11 year old in the savannah learns a little about the

harshness, but also the hope, in her environment; the 12 year old by the river and in the mountains sees the changes in his surroundings and begins to ask questions.

That is the promise of what's going on down in South Eleuthera and it beckons all of us who want to help create a more sustainable world. Thank you.

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