

Words in Print

HAITI FROM BELOW



All Access Pass to Haiti's Marine Environment

By Kristine Belizaire | Photos courtesy of Nick Hobgood



Nathalie Brunet

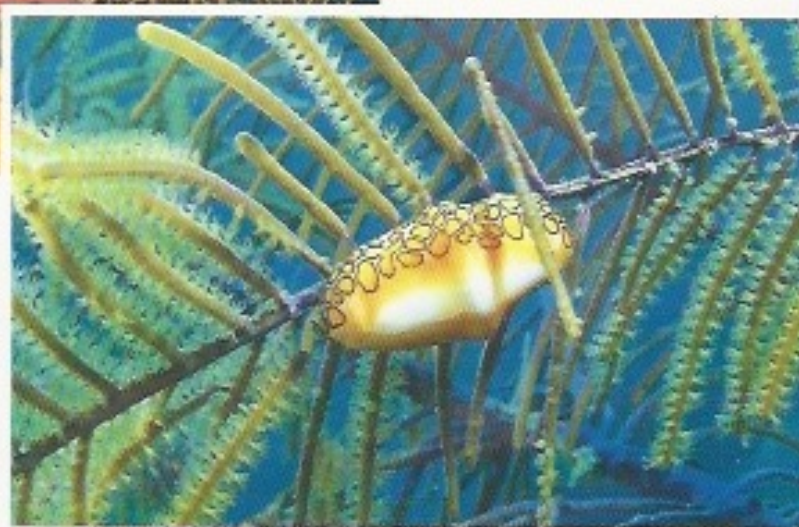


Nick Hobgood

In the 1980's, explorer Jacques-Yves Cousteau visited many of the degrading coral reefs of Haiti. Decades later, Nick Hobgood, an American who had spent his teen years in Haiti when his father worked here with USAID, would be inspired by Cousteau's discoveries, and pursue a career that included underwater photography.

As a high school student in Haiti, Hobgood frequently visited the Arcadins coast, and had a chance to discover the amazing reefs just under the surface of the azure water. "My experience in Haiti's waters as a teenager pushed me to be-

come more and more interested in marine conservation issues and pursue a Masters Degree in Oceanography," he explains. "Scuba diving for the first time in Haiti was like finally living the dream of seeing what Jacques Cousteau brought to us on the television screen," he



remembers.

For Nathalie Brunet, the woman behind the concept and the text of *Haiti From Below*, environmental issues were always one of her passions. A few years ago, she took a boating trip to the British Virgin Islands where she was able to snorkel and examine the vast marine life existing just feet from the shore. "It was wild, I felt like an alien visiting a gorgeous planet!" she exclaims. This helped her to gain an understanding of the importance of marine sports to the tourism industry. When she was a little girl in Haiti, she would often go to the beach and rarely see anything that compared to the magical images that she

witnessed in the British Virgin Islands. After reflecting on her trip, she grew more interested and curious about diving.

In 2009, she worked for a USAID-funded project that was investing in environmental preservation of two watersheds. One of its goals was to convince the Haitian government of the importance of creating a protected marine park, as Haiti is the only island in the Caribbean without one. After the earthquake of January 12, 2010, governmental



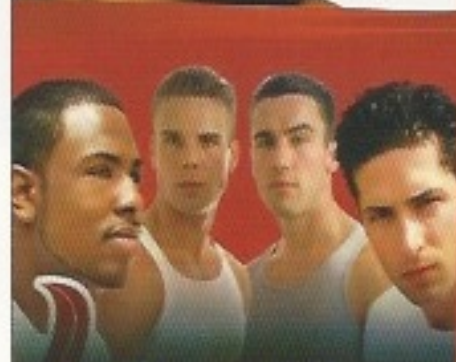
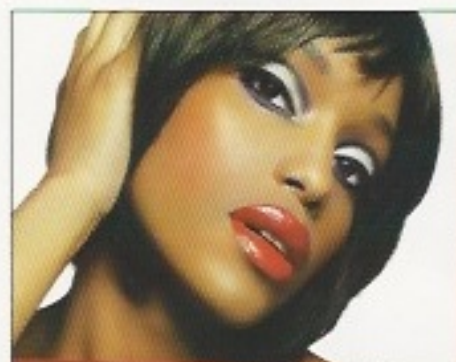
priorities shifted to other urgent humanitarian issues. This was around the time when she met Nick Hobgood, who was by then an established photographer.

During his professional career, Hobgood was assigned to East Timor where he spent six years executing USAID programs during the post-independence transition period. His passion for diving deepened during that time. He wanted to share the beauty of the reefs with his daughter and wife, so he began photographing the wonders below, and almost never went into the water without a camera. After working in East Timor, Hobgood found a job in Haiti tied to the environment, which allowed him to continue his discovery of the seas and pursue his love for underwater photography. While currently residing in Papua, New Guinea, the pictures in this book were taken between 2007 and

2010 when Nick lived in the Cap-Haitien area.

"I was blown away when Nick showed me some of the photos he took while diving in Haiti," Brunet states. She realized that publishing a book of images would be a great way to share his works with everyone who is unaware of the coastal wealth that exists in Haiti. Thus, *Haiti from Below*, a book dedicated to public awareness of marine conservation and the importance of coral reefs, was born.

In essence, it is a book about the beauty that lies in Haiti's coral reefs. "Realizing what lies below the surface is as important as coral reefs are important for the health of our marine environment," says Hobgood, "The diversity of the critters that inhabit the reefs is amazing and seeing them up close is like living a science fiction novel set



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in another world. Yet it is all to be found on our own Mother Earth."

When doing research for the book, Brunet was astounded by the things that she learned. "I learned that today, fewer than 15% of Haiti's reefs are still healthy," she shares. She goes on to tell that while Jacques Cousteau did a service by bringing the degradation of Haiti's reefs to light, there are still areas with healthy marine ecosystems. Decades ago, Haiti's coral used to attract many tourists, the same way that other Caribbean countries do now. "I also learned that marine life can be regenerated with some political will, money and educational efforts," she says.

The book is bolstering the efforts of the organization, Reef Check, and funding for its programs in Haiti. A portion of the proceeds from the book will go to the Reef Check Foundation, who is working on coral reef preservation worldwide. "I hope that Magic Haiti readers will be touched by the beauty of the underwater world and will want to share the images with others," Brunet smiles. "I hope they will be tempted to explore 'Haiti from below' firsthand in order to become marine flora and fauna ambassadors."

"The best response is one of action, to do what can be done to reduce negative impacts on the marine environment," adds Hobgood, "To help reduce

poverty which contributes to unsustainable use of resources, recycle plastics when you can, use paper wisely, avoid unnecessary cutting of trees, and contribute to reforestation in order to reduce erosion and sedimentation."

As I read Haiti from Below, I could not help but be astounded by Hobgood's vivid and colorful images that enliven every page. From various species of corals, sponges, eels, sea anemones and urchins, every image causes me to marvel at the beauty that lies below the surface around our coast. In the preface of Haiti from Below, Yann-Arthus Bertrand, photographer, journalist, filmmaker,

and ecologist, says it best: "Oceans are victims of their inaccessibility but Haiti from Below brings them closer to us."



Haiti From Below can be purchased at the duty-free shop at Haiti's International Airport. And it will soon be available on www.imagineayiti.com and www.reefcheck.org. For a complete list of locations, visit www.ayitinexus.com.

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