



This spring Nathalie Zenny will arrive in Vero Beach to continue her mission – working with island fishermen to protect Caribbean waters.

FISHING FOR A HEALTHY OCEAN

BY SIOBHAN FITZPATRICK

COOKIE KINKHEAD



Nathalie Zenny at the Calabash International Literary Festival, a Jamaican cultural event.

A petite 5 foot-3 inch woman with delicate features is not the person you'd expect to find educating a group of tough, weathered commercial fishermen on an isolated and derelict island 60 miles from Jamaica's mainland. But then you haven't met Nathalie Zenny, a marine specialist for The Nature Conservancy who is as much at home in the wild as she is at her residence in Kingston, Jamaica's capital, snuggling with her dog and cat (a tabby she rescued from the side of the road).

This spring, Nathalie will bring her

spirit and expertise to Vero Beach where she has been relocated by The Nature Conservancy's management to join its Vero Beach team, a move she welcomes. "I've been in The Nature Conservancy's Jamaica office for nearly nine years and it's time for a change," she says.

Nathalie, 39, will continue to do the same work in Vero Beach that she has been doing in the Conservancy's Kingston office: fishery management throughout the Caribbean. Specifically, she provides technical advice and managerial support to TNC and

Caribbean governments involved in the Caribbean Challenge, a program started in 2008 to expand and strengthen marine-protected areas throughout the region.

"I am the lead person for fishery issues, so I've been tasked with beginning to develop strategies for sustainable fisheries. We'll use these in our guidelines on how The Nature Conservancy can support fishery management at national levels," she says.

The role is new for her. "Until this past July, regional fisheries work has



Nathalie discusses the problems of overfishing with some fishermen on Pedro Bank.

not been my focus, just domestic," she says. This changed with the Caribbean Challenge, and Nathalie welcomes her job-role expansion: "Managing fisheries at a regional level in the Caribbean directly impacts conservation efforts throughout the area."

She attributes her understanding of the fishery-conservation connection to her nine years working in Jamaica, and particularly through the research she has done on Pedro Bank, an underwater marine plateau with a number of small cays, 60 miles off the Jamaican mainland. Pedro Bank is the country's most important fishing area because it's large (5,025 square miles) and exports 95 percent of Jamaica's queen conch. That number could drop precipitously if conch, fish stocks and feeding/breeding areas such as seagrass beds and coral reef are not effectively managed.

One of the concerns with fishing practices in Jamaica is that the fish targeted by the fishermen are reef grazers – the "sheep" of the reefs. They keep the corals clean and free of the algae that harm the coral's ability to feed and thrive. If the algae becomes too dense, the corals can eventually die.

"I learned from my work in Pedro Bank that if we don't address fishery issues we can't address conservation work because one affects the other," Nathalie explains.

Thus, one of her main objectives has become to sensitize the fishermen on Pedro Bank about the dangers of



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Located 60 miles from Jamaica, the tiny island of Middle Cay on Pedro Bank is home base for a rugged colony of artisanal and commercial fishermen who spend several months there each year.

overfishing and the need for proper management. This is especially challenging since the fishermen living on the Bank are often marginalized and pushed to fishing far from home.

"Pedro Bank is a kind of marine oasis in the middle of deeper waters, hence the reason for its productivity," Nathalie says. "It's an all-male terrain where the living conditions are difficult and the men are extremely independent. Going over there as the only woman doing conservation work was a little daunting."

But Nathalie, who has braved going to the island alone on several occasions (in addition to groups later on), managed to connect with the men. It did not take long for them to grow to trust and respect her warm, intelligent manner. For her part, she found the men approachable. "People are people. When you greet them as one human being to another with a level of respect and dignity that we should convey to all, then people open up

and start talking with you," she says. "And that's how you begin a dialogue. Whether you're talking with a fisherman, a student or an investment banker, it doesn't matter."

Having forged a relationship with the fishermen, Nathalie was able to convince several of them to join her on an expenses-paid (thanks to The Nature Conservancy) trip to Belize where the local fishermen and conservationists have worked to protect sustainable, well-stocked fishing areas.

The visit was a huge success, says Nathalie. "The Jamaican fishermen were able to speak to the Belize fishermen, and were able to see with their own eyes the abundance and diversity of fish species. It really was a transformative experience and I would say probably a life-changing one – not just for them, but for me."

When the men returned to Jamaica, she noticed a real difference. "It provided the fire and energy for them to understand not just on

an intellectual level but in their bones why conservation and proper management is so vital. Since then, they've been some of the most outspoken and vocal people demanding changes to (government conservation) policy."

This includes helping to establish Pedro Bank's first Marine Protected Area (MPA), a no-fishing zone that allows a percentage of the fish to grow to breeding age, thereby increasing the population. After that, Nathalie says she hopes to work with fishermen to develop new opportunities that will encourage them to reduce their fishing activities and earn additional income doing something else.

Nathalie documented her visit to Belize with the help of Jamaican filmmaker Esther Figueroa. The story became a film, *Massa God Fish Can Done*. The title is a play on an old Jamaican saying, "Massa God fish cyaan done,"

which means because of the abundance provided by God, man will never run out of fish. Adding the word “can” to the title of the film implied that there could be an end to fishing because of overfishing and habitat destruction.

Nathalie’s goal in making the documentary was to educate others about the dangers of over-fishing beyond the small group who went to Belize. “We live in a visual society, a visual world. So the best way to disseminate the message farther and wider to other fishermen in our country and to the general public was to create a documentary.”

This was particularly important because Pedro Bank is unknown to most Jamaicans unless they’re involved in the fishing industry. Nathalie did not expect the documentary to be viewed beyond Jamaica, but it has become quite famous throughout the Caribbean and was an entry at the Bahamas Film Festival in 2010.

“I’ve bumped into fishermen through my recent work in other countries,” she says. “They had seen *Massa God Fish Can Done* and shared it with friends and colleagues, so it’s been very heartening to realize that others are also spreading the message.”

Nathalie’s love for the sea and her passion for the natural world stemmed from her childhood in Jamaica and, later, Barbados. “I was growing up in the ’70s when kids were always outdoors,” she says. “We didn’t have video games or TV. I was a tomboy and my parents always had an appreciation for the environment, so it was just part of my experience while growing up.”

When Nathalie went to college, she veered away from her inclination to study nature and, instead, studied languages. She earned her B.A. at Queen’s University in Canada in French Literature and is fluent in four languages. “Since my parents are multi-lingual, languages come naturally to me,” she says.

However, that did not quench her zeal for the natural world, and two years after completing her bachelor’s she earned her master’s in Environmental Policy at Tufts and then her master’s in Conservation Biology at Columbia.



After she graduated from Columbia in 2001, Nathalie was selected for an internship with The Nature Conservancy in St. Croix and the following year was offered a full-time position in Jamaica. Nearly a decade later, she says she is still happily working for them and looks forward to her new office in Vero Beach.

The town itself is also perfect for this marine enthusiast. “It’s right by the ocean,” she says. “It has a surf and stand-up paddleboard community – I do both – and it’s a safe, small town where people seem to know and look out for each other. Also, it’s close to home – Jamaica.” ❀

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