FALL FAVORITES
northshore
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SCENIC SPOTS

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MISSION ON THE BAY IN SWAMPSCOTT

HISTORIC STAY
ROCKPORT’S EMERSON INN

BACK TO SCHOOL
PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM’S ART CLASSES
EDUCATION ON THE WATER WITH SALEM’S SEA SHUTTLE
ESSEX TECH’S ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMS
Sea School
The Endeavour brings the classroom out on the water for local students.

BY ALEXANDRA PECC

When kids first step onboard the Endeavour, a 45-foot catamaran, they're often scared, unsure of their footing, and anxious. But by the time they walk back onto solid land, that nervousness has melted away.

They've also had a hands-on educational experience that brings their classroom learning to life, thanks to Sea Station, a Salem Sound-based nonprofit that aims to help everyone get access to the ocean and teach them about it along the way.

"It's incredible. The transformation for most of these kids from when they go on the boat to when they get off the boat is incredible," says Emily Flaherty, ocean literacy coordinator and educator for Salem Sound Coastwatch, which works to protect Salem Sound and its watershed.

Sea Station was founded in 2011 by Michael Medlock, who'd served for many years on the board of Salem Sound Coastwatch.

"We needed a way to get people out onto the water so they could experience it firsthand," he says. "Rather than going to textbooks, they could actually be out there."

Now, Sea Station partners with Salem Sound Coastwatch on its School to Sea program, which works with teachers and schools to develop a hands-on, place-based curriculum that teaches students about the watershed by actually bringing them out into the field to visit it.

"That boat trip is the culmination of their experience," Flaherty says. Endeavour isn't a typical boat, though. It's a high-tech floating classroom, boasting features like a
42-inch, high-definition, LED screen to project images from an underwater camera, giving an up-close look at animals and plants, like eelgrass beds that act as a nursery for all kinds of ocean creatures.

“We can show kids all the life that’s in those dark, cold waters,” says Medlock. “I think that people learn best when they’re immersed in the environment. There’s motion, there’s sight, there’s sound, there’s smell.”

There’s also a 250-gallon catch-and-release onboard saltwater aquarium, which borrows sea life from Salem Sound to study (thanks to a state education permit), before releasing the creatures back to their homes. The Endeavour crew also hauls up lobster traps, and lets the kids check out the creepy crustaceans. The kids are hesitant to hold the lobsters at first, reeling back when the lobsters flash their fearsome claws. But inquisitiveness soon wins.

“All you have to do is get one kid to band the lobster claws and realize they can hold it without hurting themselves...watching that, suddenly, they all want to hold it,” Medlock says. “Making that transition from fear to confidence to curiosity...it’s inspirational.”

The Endeavour also boasts an onboard “naturalist-in-chief,” biologist Paul Erickson, a writer, author, and educator who worked for more than 25 years at the New England Aquarium.

“What I get to do now is take care of the aquarium and provide opportunities for the kids who come on board and have direct contact with the animals that are in the aquarium,” Erickson says.

He also loves seeing freedom blossom in inner-city kids. “I’ve worked with kids from inner cities that are often apartment-bound,” he says. “To see their reaction, just being in an open space, they’re just so free and liberated.”

The Endeavour isn’t just for kids whose teachers work with the School to Sea program, though. It goes on regularly scheduled tours throughout its season that anyone—kids and adults—can take. It’s also available for field trips and charters.

But educating kids is a passion for all involved. They want kids to be able to see and touch the things they learn about. “We’re really big on touch,” Erickson says. “There’s nothing like that direct interface with nature and education.”

Medlock agrees. He says there’s no textbook that could replace the experience of seeing a curious seal swim up to the side of the boat for a closer look, or learning what an exoskeleton is by holding and examining a crab.

“It’s gonna stick with them,” Flaherty says.