

“Dr. Sylvia Earle” by Christian Wallace

As the sun sank on a cool, breezy Wednesday night, Dr. Sylvia Earle spoke to an audience that included teachers, students, and members of the community about a variety of issues that we face today concerning our water systems and stressed the need to “nurture the life in the sea, to save our life on land.”

Recently in attendance at the annual Easter egg roll at the White House, Earle’s visit to San Marcos in the capacity of president of Deep Search International and chair of the Advisory Council for the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies was a rare opportunity to see Time’s first “Hero of the Planet” who delivers speeches all over the world at major conferences and is no stranger to rubbing shoulders with the world’s most important individuals.

Dr. Earle managed to offer a different approach than the typical plea for preservation of our planet’s water. The 72 year-old “living legend” spoke as if she was a twenty-something kid who had just recently developed an enthusiasm for oceanography. She described diving as “cool” and her eyes lit up with a glowing, youthful passion as images from beneath the sea were displayed on a screen beside her. In truth, Earle has been diving in rivers similar to the San Marcos in her home-state of Florida since she was 16 years old. This lifelong infatuation for the water has spawned an impressive career, in which she has accumulated a resume that would be an article in itself to fully explore, and has attained a reputation in the science community that rivals its greatest heroes.

The message that Dr. Earle had to share with those in attendance at the LBJ Mall was both a call to action and an informative lecture on the condition of our world’s water. Describing the present time as “the most exciting time for change in history,” it was obvious that Dr. Earle was optimistic about the actions being taken to preserve our blue planet. Yet despite her hopefulness for the future, she pointed out that our water has a limited number of resources and immediate action is needed to keep us from doing irreversible damage. She noted, “Every species is a cog, nut, or bolt - essential in the function of life.”

Earle offered a unique solution to this problem of conserving our water by explaining the matter through the eyes of a diver. Pointing out our uncommon opportunity at Texas State to “take the plunge” in a river that flows through the campus, she adamantly implored that those who had not explored the water on a first-hand basis to go out and “get wet.” The reason for her request was simple: “You can’t care if you don’t know.”

She went on by explaining, “If everyone could understand the nature of the water, we could take care of the water that takes care of us.” Few would understand this intimate connection that takes place between man and nature achieved by going underwater better than Dr. Earle who has directed over 60 diving expeditions, logged more than 6,000 hours underwater and still holds the record for solo diving at 3,281 feet. Her charge to get out and experience the water on a personal level went well beyond the realm of scientists:

“We need poets; we need artists, musicians, and eyes to see and bring back why it is so important that we take care of our waters.”

The conclusion of Dr. Earle’s address was specifically directed at the residents of San Marcos. She stated that organizations such as the Common Experience placing an emphasis on water and the efforts of the San Marcos River System Institute give her hope. In order to ensure the enduring success of these endeavors, we must continue to spread the idea that the well-being of the “blue planet” depends upon our individual actions to save it. According to Dr. Earle, the best way to guarantee this feat is to keep the same sense of wonder for nature as a child has for the inside a seashell. After half a century of exploring the depths of oceans, Dr. Earle has most certainly retained an appreciation and a respect for water that many take for granted.

When asked at the end of her speech, “What was the single most important thing that one could do to help preserve our water systems,” Dr. Earle replied, “Don’t let your life go by without swimming with the fishes.”

With the days getting warmer and the San Marcos River at the heart of this campus, the simple request to get wet and renew our appreciation for the blue planet does not seem like such a daunting task.