

# MY TOWN (/PACIFICA)

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## Ocean activist and world-renowned turtle scientist Dr. Wallace J. Nichols at Pacifica's Earth Day podium

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"If you hold a blue marble at arm's length, that is what the Earth looks like from a million miles away—a water planet."

These are the words of scientist, marine biologist, educator, author, activist, husband and dad Dr. Wallace "J." Nichols. Additionally the biologist and research associate at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, who is often referred to as a "Bioneer," is a huge friend to sea turtles. He is also the brain behind the BLUEMiND.

"BLUEMiND is what I call the brain state that you get when you're around/on/under water," Nichols said. "Here, where we live, it could be while walking on a beach, surfing, sitting on a cliff, fishing, kayaking, sailing, etc. Back in Indiana where I went to college it could be sitting by a river, scuba diving in a quarry. Even a fountain, a warm bath or an ocean soundtrack can get you there. Water is like a stress sink. Think of all the stress that's been literally sucked out of our bodies by water. Since stress is a leading cause of disease, that's a big deal — and worth understanding better."

Dr. Nichols will speak at the Pacifica Beach Coalition's Earth Day celebration at Linda Mar Beach, South Lot, which follows the Earth Day action. (Earth Day action, 9 to 11:30 a.m. Earth Day celebration, 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.) Also speaking is Chris Pincetich, PhD, Marine Biologist and founder of The Sea Turtle Restoration Project, <http://www.seaturtles.org/> (<http://www.seaturtles.org/>).

Nichols was born in New York City. Adopted, he was raised with his adopted brother, three foster sisters, and a "revolving door of foreign exchange students."

"My parents raised us in the New York and Chicago areas," Nichols said. "But I've lived in a dozen places all around the continent, in the United States and Mexico. So I just call myself a North American."

While his parents weren't particularly interested in environmental issues, they did raise their children to follow their dreams. Having since found his biological family as well — his mom, dad, six siblings and a bunch of nieces and nephews — "I can conclusively say the nature thing is in my blood. Nature and nurture!"

In 1969, when Nichols was two, he fell for the ocean and said it has been a steady relationship since. He was also quite little when he fell in love with turtles. When he learned that he could make a career out of studying them, that pretty much "sealed the deal!"

Nichols has his master's in economics and his doctorate in wildlife ecology and evolutionary biology. As a doctoral student at the University of Arizona in the mid '90s he studied Baja's sea turtles. With the help of "some really good glue and some smart fishermen friends," Nichols attached a GPS transponder to an adult loggerhead sea turtle whom he named Adelita.

"We tracked Adelita from Baja to Japan over the course of 368 days in 1996-1997," Nichols said. "She reached the coast of Japan and we lost the signal. I like to imagine that 'now' she's doing what turtles do, eating, migrating and laying eggs. But unfortunately I suspect her actual fate may have involved squid nets."

Nichols noted once a sea turtle reaches a certain size, where the list of predators that can eat them becomes very short, their main threat is humans.

What can individuals do, right now, to save sea turtles?

"When I'm asked for lists of things to do these days, I turn the question around and ask folks what one thing they can do that they aren't already doing," Nichols said. "After a moment of thought, everyone comes up with a good answer. Their answers are usually much better and more creative than what would have been on my list. Their ideas are personal and therefore more likely to happen. We all read a lot of 'top ten green lists' or 'tips for the planet,' and now our brains just filter them out."

Nichols speaks about the ocean as frequently as is possible to commissions, schools, halls, on the radio, on television.

"At least once a week I sit with a new group of people discussing the ocean," Nichols said.

"Whether it's the Gateway School kindergarteners, the amazing Save Our Shores Sea Stewards class, a TEDx conference, a university lecture or a one-on-one consultation with a student."

And for those who think they recognize Nichols' face from Gap ads, they'd be right. The turtle scientist has long supplemented his meager ocean ambassador income with freelance work as a career model. "You never know where my big nose will show up!" he laughed.

Wherever he goes, Dr. Nichols brings blue marbles. These gifts, representing our 'Water Planet,' are given to individuals to thank them for their commitment to the ocean. Those who receive the blue marble are asked also to give blue marbles to thank those they know for their respective "acts of ocean kindness," and so on. (A bag of blue marbles can be bought <http://www.bluemarbles.org/>.) Nichols estimates there are as many as a million of his blue marbles in circulation around the planet, including in the hands of such folks as Jane Goodall, Harrison Ford and Lance Mackey, four-time Iditarod champion. (He carried one with him during the recent race.)

"My kids (daughters Grayce, 10, and Julia, 7) think it's funny because marbles fall out of my coat pocket all the time," Nichols laughed. "And of course there will be blue marbles in Pacifica! There are so many people in this community who deserve some gratitude!"

Nichols said that he, his wife Dana, and their two young daughters are all about the ocean, travel, animals, local food and activism.

"That is just a normal part of our lives. Of course, there's Justin Bieber and plenty of sparkly flip-flops too!"

Nichols said that if he had one wish for people and their relationship with the Earth it would be to, "Wish that every human being had the opportunity and time to fall deeply in love with some part of the natural world at a young age. There's so much power in that."

"There's a small group of sea turtle fanatics (like me!), who care a lot, and fight for sea turtles," Nichols said. "And that's translating into good things for sea turtles around the world. Fortunately, sea turtles are well-loved. I worry more about the endangered critters with a smaller fan base, the invertebrates of the world. They need our love too!"

"Everyone can find that thing that revs their engine, for me it's been turtles, and dive in and make a huge difference, even if it's not their 'job.'" Nichols continued. "In the summer of 2003 we trekked the California coast from Oregon to Mexico. One of the things we learned from the many people we met was that it takes caring, passionate citizens — not just organizations and agencies, to make change happen. Dentists, teachers, artists, musicians, businesspeople, fishers, kids are the ones who have initiated the protection of our coasts and oceans. I'd like to give them all a blue marble and say thank you."

April 21, Pacifica, Earth Day Action, 9-11:30am. Earth Day Celebration at Linda Mar Beach, 11:30am-3:30pm.

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