

Leadership-in-Action Project Report

Kira Jensen | University of Toronto | Laidlaw Scholars Programme

Partner NGO: Diverseas (Indonesia)

Supervisor: Brigitta Maria Andrea Gunawan, Founder

Introduction

My Leadership-in-Action (LiA) project, *Into the Blue: Exploring Immersive Conservation Education & Storytelling in Indonesia to Empower Youth*, took place with **Diverseas**, an Indonesian NGO dedicated to marine conservation and environmental education. Diverseas is part of a growing network of youth-led organizations responding to the urgent need for ocean literacy in Indonesia—a country made up of over 17,000 islands, where communities are deeply connected to the sea yet often lack access to marine science education. Their mission is to bridge that gap by combining coral restoration, school outreach, and cutting-edge tools like virtual reality (VR) films that bring the underwater world into classrooms.

The significance of this project lay in its intersection of conservation and communication. While Indonesia is one of the world's largest maritime nations, ocean literacy has historically been the privilege of those with access to higher education, research equipment, or coastal resources. Diverseas aims to make marine knowledge accessible to youth and educators across the country, including those in landlocked areas who have never seen the ocean. Their approach reflects several of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- ❖ **SDG 4 (Quality Education)**: by creating open-access, immersive learning tools.
- ❖ **SDG 14 (Life Below Water)**: by documenting and protecting coral reefs and seagrass beds.
- ❖ **SDG 13 (Climate Action)**: by addressing coral bleaching, sea-level rise, and local adaptation strategies.
- ❖ **SDG 15 (Life on Land)**: by connecting marine issues with mangrove and coastal ecosystems.

My role was both practical and reflective. I participated in coral site monitoring dives, supported environmental education workshops, collaborated on social media and VR storytelling, and documented my journey in weekly reflections. These responsibilities pushed me to step into spaces outside my academic comfort zone. Coming from a background in climate politics and environmental ethics, I arrived without formal training in marine biology or immersive media. This contrast was exactly what made the experience meaningful: I was challenged to adapt, contribute, and learn in an unfamiliar context, testing the leadership values we developed through the Laidlaw programme.

The project also represented a personal bridge. In my academic work, I often grapple with big-picture questions about climate justice, sustainability, and governance. This LiA experience brought those abstract concepts into tangible form: sitting in classrooms where teachers debated pesticide use and composting, swimming alongside coral fragments struggling to regrow, or helping a peer inspire young women to pursue ocean careers. It was here that leadership became lived, not theoretical—grounded in relationships, humility, and storytelling.

From the outset, I set three SMART goals to guide my growth:

1. Develop cross-cultural leadership and collaboration skills.
2. Enhance storytelling and impact communication for conservation advocacy.
3. Strengthen community engagement strategies for environmental education.

This report reflects on how I pursued those goals in practice. It explores the challenges I encountered, the leadership skills I applied and developed, the ethical considerations I faced, and the collaborative dynamics that shaped the work. Above all, it reflects on what it meant to lead and learn in a new cultural and environmental context, and how these lessons will shape my future.

Challenges Faced

One of the greatest challenges was adjusting to working across language and cultural barriers. In the first weeks, I hesitated to join conversations when the group spoke in Indonesian. I defaulted to silence, worried I would interrupt or not understand enough. Later, I realized that this hesitancy unintentionally reinforced separation. Through feedback from my coordinator, I learned I could respectfully signal when I wanted clarification or contribute. This taught me that humility and openness often matter more than fluency; being present and eager to engage is itself a bridge.

Another challenge was stepping into scientific and technical spaces where I had little background. Coral restoration dives required me to scrub algae from artificial structures, monitor growth, and collect data. My academic training is in philosophy and climate politics, not biology. Initially, I felt out of place. But by asking questions, learning from peers, and reframing my role as a bridge between science and communication, I discovered that my outsider perspective was valuable.

Finally, balancing creativity with structure was difficult. In Week 5, I was tasked with creating social media content from coral site visits. I improvised much of the content plan, which worked but could have been more strategic. This revealed my tendency to jump into creative details without first mapping the bigger picture.

Leadership Skills Applied and Developed

Communication and Storytelling

A central part of my work involved turning raw experiences into accessible narratives. From editing VR descriptions to drafting blog posts, I practiced making conservation engaging for audiences unfamiliar with coral reefs. I also interviewed local divers and listened to their personal ocean stories, learning how storytelling rooted in care and lived experience can be as powerful as data.

Collaboration and Team Dynamics

Throughout the project, I learned that I thrive in amplifying others' voices. In Week 4, I supported Amanda, a Diverseas Scholarship recipient, during her high school presentation. Watching students—especially young women—see themselves in her story was powerful. My role was to assist, encourage, and create space for her leadership. This experience reminded me that leadership is often about platforming others rather than leading from the front.

Cultural Humility

Working in Bali taught me to notice my own assumptions. For example, during the sustainable food workshop with teachers, I was expecting something to the effect of what I typically learn in “healthy eating” workshops. Instead, I learned about pesticide use, fisheries, and composting practices unique to Indonesia. In stepping back and listening, I realized that sustainability is highly contextual. Cultural humility meant valuing these perspectives not as supplementary knowledge but as central to understanding global environmental challenges.

Initiative and Joyful Leadership

When I took on social media documentation, what could have been an individual task became a collective one. Team members offered to pose, film, and joke together, transforming content creation into a bonding experience. I realized my natural inclination to bring joy and energy into group work is itself a form of leadership: enthusiasm can sustain momentum as much as efficiency.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the project, I had to consider **whose stories I was helping to tell**. With VR and social media content, I asked myself: does this representation serve the community, or does it risk oversimplifying? I leaned on guidance from Diverseas' founder, Brigitta, who emphasized co-creation and consent. For example, during school workshops, we prioritized letting teachers and students shape the narrative rather than imposing a preset framework.

Another ethical consideration was **avoiding voluntourism**. I was conscious that my role was temporary. Rather than framing myself as central to the project's success, I saw my work as contributing to ongoing efforts that would continue after I left. My reflection blog for Diverseas was written with this in mind: to honor their long-term mission and my small part in it.

Collaboration and Team Dynamics

Working with Diverseas showed me the **power of distributed leadership**. Everyone—interns, educators, divers—played a role in advancing conservation. There was no single “hero”; rather, leadership was shared. This contrasted with many academic or professional settings I am used to, where leadership often looks hierarchical. I found that I flourished in this collaborative structure, where care, consistency, and mutual support mattered more than authority.

I also noticed how much **representation matters** in shaping community dynamics. Seeing Amanda present to students made clear that sometimes leadership is embodied in who stands in front of the room, not what they say. This has deepened my understanding of equity and access as leadership concerns.

Conclusion

My LiA project with Diverseas stretched me in ways I hadn't anticipated. I faced fears underwater, navigated language barriers, and entered new cultural and disciplinary contexts. Across these challenges, I learned that leadership is not always about confidence or direction—it can mean presence, humility, storytelling, and making space for others.

The three SMART goals I set guided me throughout:

- ❖ Cross-cultural collaboration taught me to balance listening and contributing. I entered the programme hesitant to speak up when I didn't fully understand the language or context, but I left with a much greater capacity to participate even when uncertain.
- ❖ Storytelling for advocacy allowed me to merge creativity with conservation. From editing VR descriptions to capturing social media content, I discovered the unique power of narrative in making science accessible.
- ❖ Community engagement strategies showed me that representation and accessibility are key to impact. Seeing Amanda inspire young women to pursue ocean careers crystallized for me that leadership is also about who gets to stand in front of the room and tell their story.

Looking back across the six weeks, I see how each week embodied different lessons about leadership. In Week 1, I overcame the fear of deep water and realized that leadership can start with quiet presence rather than authority. In Week 2, I leaned into creativity and noticed how deeply I value belonging in a team. Week 3 reminded me that sustainability is contextual,

shaped by cultural practices around food and waste, and that curiosity is the best bridge across differences. Week 4 taught me that amplifying others' voices can be one of the most fulfilling forms of leadership. In Week 5, I saw how enthusiasm could turn even technical monitoring into a joyful team effort. And Week 6 allowed me to reflect, close the loop, and contribute lasting resources that the NGO could use beyond my stay.

The experience also reinforced several Laidlaw values that I hope to carry forward. I practiced curiosity by asking questions even when I felt out of my depth. I learned bravery in stepping into new spaces, from the ocean floor to Indonesian classrooms. I was reminded of the importance of integrity, especially when thinking about how stories and images represent communities. I built resilience in adapting to challenges, from the loneliness of remote work to the unpredictability of coral site conditions. And above all, I embraced the mindset of a global citizen—recognizing that leadership is not about bringing answers into a new context, but about co-creating with humility and care.

The implications extend beyond me. For Diverseas, the content we created and the reflections I contributed will remain as tools for education and advocacy. For the communities I worked with, I hope the workshops and school visits sparked curiosity that will continue to grow. And for myself, this experience affirmed that my long-term path lies at the intersection of environmental ethics, policy, and communication. I want to keep working at the boundary between research and storytelling, where ideas become accessible and action-oriented.

Most importantly, this experience shifted how I think about leadership. Before, I often imagined leadership as standing at the front of the room or directing a team. Now, I understand it as something much broader: it can look like amplifying someone else's story, structuring a workshop so that others take ownership, or making work feel joyful and collective. These forms of leadership are quieter, but they are no less powerful.

As I move forward, I want to hold onto this expanded definition of leadership. In my research, I hope to continue exploring how environmental education shapes political and personal decisions. In my career, I want to be someone who not only contributes expertise but also makes space for others, communicates across divides, and models integrity in action. And in my personal life, I want to practice the same humility and curiosity that carried me through six weeks in Indonesia—listening first, then contributing, always with care for the people and places around me.

In short, my Leadership-in-Action project did not just give me new skills; it gave me a new way of seeing leadership. It taught me that effective leaders are not defined by how much space they take up, but by how much space they create for others. That is the lesson I will carry with me—whether in academia, advocacy, or any future leadership role.