

# Into the Blue: Reflections on Leadership, Storytelling, and Ocean Conservation

When I first arrived in Bali for my Leadership-in-Action project, I thought I knew what to expect: coral reefs, conservation workshops, and a chance to put leadership theory into practice. What I didn't anticipate was how much this experience would reshape my sense of what leadership even means—and how deeply it would tie together my academic background in climate politics with lived, hands-on work in ocean education.

I partnered with Diverseas, an NGO working to make ocean literacy accessible through coral restoration, immersive virtual reality (VR) content, and school outreach. Their mission is simple but profound: to ensure that more young people in Indonesia—especially in landlocked communities—can develop a connection to marine conservation. Over six weeks, I moved between the sea, the classroom, and the editing room, carrying out a project that asked me to be a diver, a communicator, a collaborator, and a learner all at once.

## Facing Fear Underwater

In Week 1, I earned my scuba certification so I could join coral monitoring dives. I'd been a synchronized swimmer for ten years, so I thought this part would come easily. Instead, I was humbled. A ten-meter pool is nothing compared to the open ocean, where breath control feels different when your life depends on an oxygen tank. On my first day, I froze during basic drills—not because I couldn't do them, but because I hesitated. My instructor reminded me that 90% of the barrier was mental. That lesson has stayed with me: leadership often begins not with mastery, but with courage to move through hesitation.

## Creativity and Connection

In Week 2, I leaned into creativity. I worked on social media content designed to make ocean conservation relatable to younger audiences. I also interviewed local divers about their journeys into conservation. Listening to them, I realized that protecting the ocean is not just about ecosystems; it's about people. Their stories were rooted in passion, care, and responsibility, and they reminded me that leadership is not always about big gestures. Sometimes it's about the everyday consistency of showing up and mentoring others.

## Learning from Classrooms

Week 3 took me into an unexpected space: a workshop for teachers on sustainable food practices. I learned about Indonesia's struggles with pesticides, fisheries, and composting. On the second day, the teachers cooked balanced, sustainable meals at three stations. Watching them, I realized that leadership can look like structuring spaces where others take ownership.

The facilitators didn't just lecture—they handed the process over to the teachers, who built their own knowledge through practice. It was a reminder that education is most powerful when it is participatory.

## **Representation and Inspiration**

In Week 4, I accompanied Amanda, a Diverseas scholar, to a high school where she shared her story. The aim was to encourage students—especially young women—to consider careers in ocean conservation. The energy in the room was incredible. Students weren't just listening; they were inspired, asking questions, imagining themselves in new roles. What struck me most was that Amanda didn't need to deliver a perfect speech to have an impact. Her presence as a woman in a male-dominated field was leadership in itself. This experience taught me that sometimes the most powerful form of leadership is simply representation.

## **Joyful Leadership**

Week 5 was my final dive day and coral site visit. I was tasked with capturing content for social media, which quickly became a group project. Teammates posed, filmed, and even joked underwater, turning what could have been routine documentation into a joyful team effort. I realized that my natural tendency to bring energy and playfulness into group work helps create bonds and keep morale high. Leadership doesn't always have to be serious; joy can be just as important in sustaining a team's momentum.

## **Closing the Loop**

In Week 6, I shifted into editing mode: refining coral site footage, polishing blog posts, and writing VR descriptions. My favorite task was drafting a reflection of my journey for Diverseas. It felt like closing a loop—translating experiences into a narrative that would live beyond my time there. It also reminded me that reflection itself is a leadership practice. By pausing, acknowledging growth, and sharing lessons, we model vulnerability and gratitude.