Pam: [00:00] The "Women Mind the Water" podcast engages artists in conversation about their work and explores their connection with the ocean. Through these stories "Women Mind the Water" hopes to inspire and encourage action to protect the ocean and her creatures. Today, I'm speaking with Jess Newley. Jess is a Washington state-based Environmental Educator, working in the area of marine conservation. She has a passion for underwater photography and videography. Jess is developing a virtual reality education program to teach school kids underwater using a 360 degree camera immersing them into the beautiful and critical nearshore habitats of the San Juan Islands, welcome Jess. Let me start by asking you about your journey. How did you become interested in photography?

Jess: [00:56] Hi Pam, thanks for having me today. It's kind of been a long journey for me, but if I think about it I probably started pretty early. I think I got my first point-and-shoot camera, I think I was a senior in high school, or maybe a freshman in college, and this is, you know, back in 2004, 2005, so we're talking yeah, some older technology. But I've always been a person that likes to document everything so that's definitely just something that's part, I was born with this need to document things. And then I would say that I think it got a little more, my photography took a step up when I started traveling and I studied abroad in Switzerland when I was in college and traveled around Western Europe a lot, I think, yeah, I took a lot of pictures then. And then it wasn't until a couple of years after that I met a boy, who's now my husband, and we started, who also liked to travel, and traveled with me and we took off on a big trip to Southeast Asia and we rode a motorcycle around for a few months and that's when I got my first DSLR, like a big camera for that trip so that's when I took a next step up for my photography.

Jess: [02:31] And really I guess the whole point, and my goal, and why I did that, was just so I could share with friends and family back home all the beautiful new things I was seeing. I was really inspired by the people. I love different cultures and meeting new people and taking, you know, take portraits and photographs of the new scenery, especially from the back of a motorcycle was really cool. So yeah, definitely that trip. I mean I came home with over 10,000 pictures to sort through and share online and like started doing kinda the blog thing then just about our travels and documenting that. But yeah, I'd say I really got into it through traveling and wanting to kinda tell the story of the people we met and the places we went to through my photography.

Jess: [03:33] I'm not sure there was like one like major like transformative experience, it was kind of a growing and growing passion of mine through the years. I definitely would say that probably kind of a more like catalyst in that was when I started scuba diving. Me and Chris, my husband, that same boy, we moved over to Egypt and we were diving in the Red Sea and became scuba diving instructors and that's when I really got, wanted to share what I was seeing in the underwater world with friends and family back home. And so that's when I got my, my first underwater camera and that really was a big change for me just because I didn't, I love scuba diving, and I love taking new people under water, but that, I was only working as a scuba diving instructor and a guide for about a year.

Jess: [04:38] But in that, during that time is when I had the underwater camera and that's when I got really, really into the underwater photography and I guess that's probably when I started using my photography more as an art form too. But yeah, I'd probably say my diving experience is what made me dive deeper into my photography. And actually I would start by saying that it was when I was over in Egypt, and working as a scuba diving instructor, that that's when I also decided that diving and guiding wasn't gonna just be enough for me that I wanted to go back to school and I got my master's in Environmental Education 'cause I decided that the next time that we lived somewhere, or traveled to somewhere, that I wanted to be able to do more to help the local community with conservation and sustainability for their ocean. We lived and traveled a lot of places in small villages that depend on their water for their food, for fishing and substance and so I really wanted the tools and resources to do more for these communities that we are in. So I went back to school, I went to Western Washington University here in Washington, and I studied Environmental Education.

Jess: [06:05] I did a really cool program called, the North Cascades Institute, and it's actually up in the North Cascades National Park. Kind of the odd thing is that I was the only person, out of our 14-people cohort, that was really marine oriented. It's kinda not the first program you think of for someone that like has this huge passion for the ocean to be, you know, two hours up in the middle of the mountains, but that led me to kinda push me to explore the lakes and the rivers up there. And so, yeah, I would often go snorkeling and diving in the lake in places that no one's ever like really explored under the surface, and again, it was basically because yeah, I love the water and I needed to be in the water you know being a girl stuck in the middle of mountains. And so, but I got some, a pretty cool job with the National Park Service one summer, before I graduated, and I got to go up to another lake above the Learning Center where I was living, Ross Lake, and I got to, they're studying this invasive species, redside shiner, that was taking over the lake and taking over the native fish and they were counting and doing these surveys just by visual.

Jess: [07:20] And they asked me and they knew I was a photographer, and did underwater photography, if I had any ideas on how they could kind of streamline their surveys. And so, yeah, that was the first big experience I had with science and being like, oh, how can I use my underwater photography, and these tools I have, to do these visual scientific surveys for counting fish. And so I did come up with a method and like a meter-by-meter square plot and you hold it and you take pictures as you swim and then later you can have someone back in the office count the fish seen in the square. And then kinda things kind of just kept on the momentum for, yeah, I don't know, I think that was the first time that my light bulb came on like, oh, I can use my photography for science which is a pretty awesome thing since I was on this new journey too for conservation and science and now all of a sudden I'm intertwining that with my passion for photography, and especially underwater photography, which is pretty cool. But I would say that kind of the real catalyst that continued on, and I'm still doing today, is when I was living up there and just for fun I was exploring the rivers, like I said, and snorkeling, and I started doing salmon photography.

Jess: [08:41] And that, again, I was just doing it for fun on the weekends when I wasn't working, or in school, but it kinda became a big project for me. I made a goal to document all five species of salmon in the Skagit River, which I did and it was really fun. And then after that I donated these photos to nonprofits, like the Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group, that does really great work up the Skagit River, lots of restoration, restoration work, science work, and education. And so I donated to them and kind of my goal there was to make it so like, I'm, I'm tired of seeing these nonprofits and conservation groups using photos of like dead salmon on a hook, you know, like that was the only way that they knew how to get photos of salmon is like from fishermen, or on, dead salmon on the bank of the river that have, the carcasses have died and I was, 'cause I have seen it underwater and they're so beautiful and vibrant colors, but that was became a next goal of mine is to be able to provide photos for these non-profits to use, 'cause I just think that having a strong imagery, yes, you need that for the conservation work, you know, you need, and I think people seeing those fish underwater hopefully they make a more personal connection than seeing them on a hook and can get engaged in a different way of seeing these wild, beautiful salmon in their natural habitat.

Jess: [10:22] I guess the picture that comes to mind, that reflects my relationship with the ocean, is a picture that I took when me and Chris, my husband, were traveling on our sailboat in French Polynesian. We did a pretty epic journey for five years and sailed across the ocean and did a lot of video and photography work for that. But one of my favorite pictures from there is a reef, a pretty like standard South Pacific reef scene, in particular, in French Polynesia, they're really known for their sharks. It's kinda the closer you get to Asia the more sharks have been fished out, and overfished, and so this is kinda the last, one of the last places that you can really see an abundance of sharks. And one of my favorite, favorite pictures from that whole journey was a picture in a particular reef, you can probably see a hundred sharks in the photo. And these are reef sharks, grey reef sharks, and I don't know, I guess the reason why I'm thinking that reflects my relationship with the ocean is because most people, like my mother, when they see these pictures, they think I'm pretty crazy that I would be in the middle of all these, you know, a top apex predator of the ocean, but that was like my favorite, favorite thing. I mean the ocean provides me with so much adventure, my passion, these awesome creatures that I get to swim amongst, and yeah which is pretty cool.

Jess: [12:07] So yeah, this picture is just one of your reef scene, very, your blue, pretty blue South Pacific water, and then just sharks for days, like layers upon layers of sharks and it's just pretty special 'cause we don't get to see that a lot. I would say my photographs express me as a person and so I just take pictures of whatever I find beautiful and worth documenting and so it really does reflect my values and what I appreciate in the world, which is a lot of bright colors, and beauty, and life. And so if you look through my portfolio photography you're gonna see a lot of that. So while I do have this great passion, or maybe obsession, with the underwater world, I also love, like I mentioned earlier, different cultures, and people, and traveling, and these places that we get to travel to and the people we get to meet really are reflected in my photography and I love sharing that with other people.

Jess: [13:26] Yeah, so right now I am working on a virtual reality education program for students. We're starting with high school students in the San Juan Islands, where I'm living, and then soon we'll do it regionally around the Salish Sea area, but I have been filming with a 360-degree video camera underwater for the past about eight months and documenting the precious beautiful life of our shorelines around the San Juan Islands. The shoreline habitat around the islands is really, really not only cool habitat, but it's a critical habitat that provides a lot of shelter, and nurseries, and food for herring for important forage fish like them, for the salmon that eat the herring, another forage fish, and then also, yeah, ultimately our shorelines provide all of this for the orcas. And so what my goal is with this program is to be able to take students, you know, they grew up in the islands, they've, they've read about forage fish, and salmon, and orca their whole life. The only, you know, it takes a lot of gear and it can be quite dangerous, it's a lot of things, so not everyone gets to experience seeing these things under the surface and for me, which is kinda why I'd started my photography, and underwater photography in the first place, right, is to show people life under the surface. But then doing, you know, they say a picture's worth a thousand words. I would say when I decided to bump up a little bit into videography, because a video is even a million words, to see the action and live movement and then I would say virtual reality technology is even doubling that because not only are you seeing that live action, but you have a pair of headset on and you're in the middle of it and students can look all the way around and they can see, you know, you're swimming through a school of herring, and diving through the bull kelp beds.

Jess: [15:36] And so my hope, my goal is with this curriculum I'm creating, is to take students on these diving adventures in the shallow waters of our shorelines and showing them the food, the marine food web in a different way that hopefully they can make personal connections with and inspire them to be stewards. The program that I just described is my dream project. It really combines all of these things for the last 10 years, all my passions, combines the underwater. And this is the first time that I've really been getting paid to do underwater photography and videography, which to me is success in my book to get paid to do what I love and then yeah, to be able to take students and do this for, you know, education and science purposes, this really feels like, yeah, my dream project.

Pam: [16:33] I have been speaking with Jess Newley for the, "Women Mind the Water" podcast series. This series can be viewed on womenmindthewater.com. An audio-only version of this podcast is available on the "Women Mind the Water" website and on iTunes. This is Pam Paris, also, thank you for listening.