



Two environmentally conscious California teenagers have dived for and collected thousands of decaying balls from the ocean floor along the Pebble Beach coastline. **BY ALAN SHIPNUCK**

Photographs by Robert Beck

# Underwater Mission



**SEA CHANGE** An estimated 269,000 metric tons of plastics are floating in the oceans around the world. Golf balls are a small part of the problem, but marine life might mistake the string used to manufacture older models for sea grass. And larger fish and mammals can consume them.

**A**LEX WEBER first discovered golf balls at the bottom of the ocean during a recreational dive off Carmel Beach, California, with her father in September 2015. At the time, she had no idea these man-made pearls would consume her life. “There wasn’t this big master plan,” says Alex, 17. “I just knew they didn’t belong in the ocean, and I wanted to get them out.” Various friends of Alex’s tagged along once or twice, but only Jack Johnston, a fellow Carmel High junior, kept coming back. It is grueling work that begins with hauling kayaks down the steep sand hill at Carmel Beach, followed by a long paddle across the bay through strong winds and tides, and then hours of diving in frigid water that always leaves their lips



blue, despite thick wet suits, hoods, gloves, and booties. After all that, they have to schlep hundreds of balls and their gear back up the hill to their cars. The balls are stored in the Webers’ garage, and some of them stink—a sulfuric, chemical smell that is a hint of the toxins they may be releasing into the sea. For 98 years the hackers at Pebble Beach Golf Links, whose 8th tee sits roughly 60 feet above the beach, have been pumping balls into the Pacific. Since last May, Alex and Jack have pulled more than 9,000 balls out of this cove, including 1,900 in one marathon day. These accidental activists, who are studying marine biology at the Island School in the Bahamas this semester, dedicated themselves not only to cleaning up the waters astride their hometown

but also to bringing awareness to a global concern. “It became pretty obvious this issue was bigger than us, and we had to go to people who could help us change things,” Jack says. So on YouTube they uploaded affecting underwater footage that showed mass quantities of balls moving with the currents. Then they gave a spiffy PowerPoint presentation to officials at the Pebble Beach Co. and the



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the federal agency that oversees the 14 marine sanctuaries across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans and the Gulf of Mexico. The result is a still-evolving collaboration among Pebble Beach Co., the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and NOAA. The aquarium’s dive team has committed to monthly underwater cleanups, while Pebble Beach Co. is

putting together a best-practices plan to address the issue long-term. And Jack and Alex have formed their own charity, The Plastic Pick-up, which is dedicated to removing plastics from the ocean. Says Anna Cummins, cofounder of the 5 Gyres Institute, a nonprofit organization devoted to the crisis of plastic pollution in the oceans, “I love that Jack and Alex are introducing this issue to an entirely new audience.”

