

Destin in the land of the pharaohs

Area teens make scientific contribution in Egypt

By Tosha Sketo

(850) 654-8446

TSketo@thedestinlog.com

While most high school students spent their Christmas break shopping and hanging out with friends, a group of Destin teenagers traveled to Egypt to make their contribution to global scientific knowledge.

The high school seniors are members of the gifted program at Niceville High School, where in 2003, gifted teacher Richard Hernandez started the Northwest Florida NaGISA team. NaGISA, National Geography In-Shore Areas, is a global study of marine diversity along the world's coastline. Professor Yoshihisa Shirayama of Kyoto University in Japan started the NaGISA project, one of 14 field projects run by the Census of Marine Life, in 2000.

Hernandez heard about the project while completing the Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund Master Teacher program, where he met Dr. Shirayama. Upon completion of the program, he was asked if Niceville High School would like to be the test case for whether or not high school students could contribute to the census, which originally only tapped college students to handle the protocol and deliver accurate information. Hernandez accepted, and the rest is history.

"I wasn't surprised that they could do this," Hernandez said. "They have a phenomenal capacity. All you have to do is find a way to harness and direct it."

Since starting the program, the Niceville High School NaGISA team, which starts training new members their freshman year, has collected massive amounts of data from our local coastline and traveled around the world to train other high school students and collect data in other countries. On Dec. 26, the team left for a two-week trip to Egypt, where they collected samples from the Red Sea.

"This program gives us real life science experience," said Jeremy Hsiang of Destin. "We have real responsibilities in this class. Some-

thing like this has never been done before."

Alexis Reddington of Destin said the team spent many hours working to prepare for the trip. In class, the students learned new analysis procedures and researched the culture they would experience in Egypt. On the weekends, the team washed cars and sold baked goods in an effort to raise money for the trip, which cost about \$3,600 each.

But all agreed it was well worth the effort and expense.

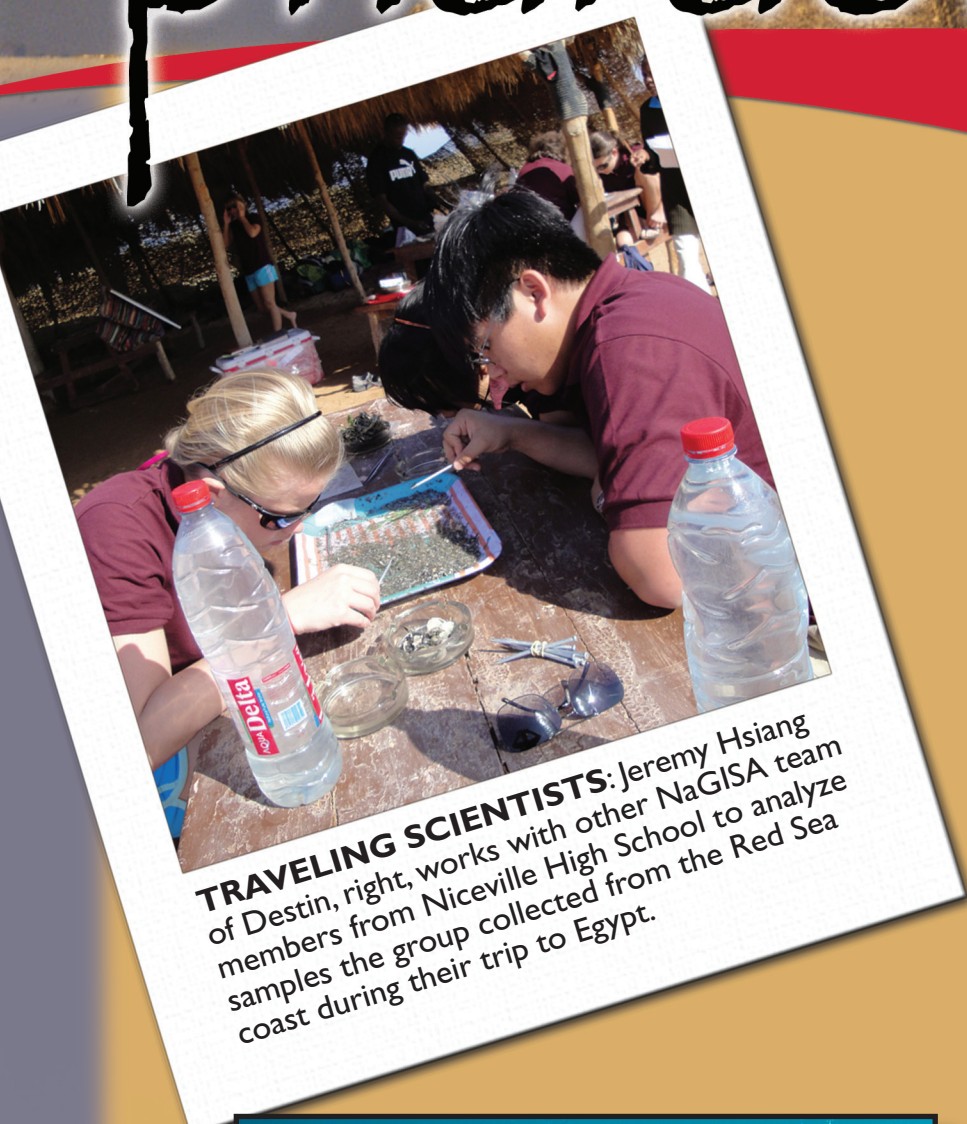
"We landed in Cairo, and the next day we saw the pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx," Reddington said. "That was the big wow."

While getting to see the sites was exciting for all the students, Hsiang and Desiree Babin of Destin said the people made the most impact on them. Babin said being immersed in such a different culture and seeing the real life scenes in Cairo was the best part of the trip. And Hsiang said he really enjoyed talking to the kids from the international school in Cairo, who helped collect the samples.

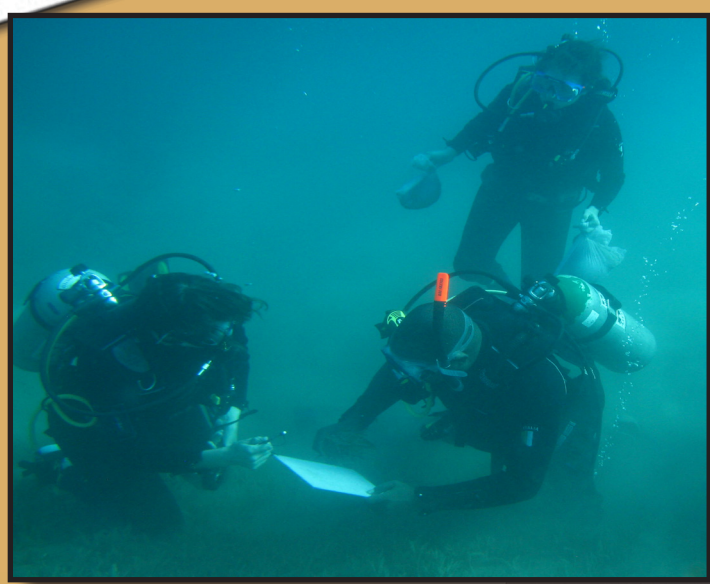
"I'm still friends with two of them on Facebook," Hsiang said.

After seeing the wonders of Egypt, the NaGISA team got to work. The students, some of which are trained scuba divers, collected samples from the coast, up to a depth of 20 meters. After they collected the samples, the students analyzed their findings. According to Reddington, who hopes to study marine biology at the University of Florida, they have found a few organisms they have not been able to classify. While it's possible that the team simply isn't familiar with the organisms, Reddington said it's exciting to consider that they could have discovered something new.

"The whole experience in Egypt was new and drastically different," Reddington said. "I think it gave me a sense of knowing that even being younger and less educated than others, I can be a part of something really big."



TRAVELING SCIENTISTS: Jeremy Hsiang of Destin, right, works with other NaGISA team members from Niceville High School to analyze samples the group collected from the Red Sea coast during their trip to Egypt.



RED SEA WONDERS: "Diving in the Red Sea was cool," said Alexis Reddington of Destin, who was part of the NaGISA dive team. "There's actually sea life down there."



DISCOVERING EGYPT: The Northwest Florida NaGISA team, along with program instructor Richard Hernandez, visited the Pyramids of Giza and the Great Sphinx of Giza before starting their work on the Red Sea coast.

Photos special to The Log / Illustration by KATHY HARRISON