

Concord Monitor

5 Questions with Ellen O'Donnell

By [Tricia L. Nadolny](#) / [Monitor staff](#)

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Ellen O'Donnell, a teacher from Deerfield, will soon set out for the open sea as part of a whale watching expedition sponsored by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. O'Donnell, one of 25 teachers selected for the program from 260 applicants, will leave for the 12-day trip on May 14 from Cape Cod, Mass. When she returns, O'Donnell will show her students at the Deerfield Community School what she learned when they go on their own whale watching field trip.

Tell me more about the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Teachers at Sea project. They want teachers to be doing real research and bringing it into the classroom. There has been research documenting that if students see the science in action it means more to them, and they get more out of it. . . . While on the ship I will be a research scientist. I will be doing everything the scientists are doing.

Have you done anything like this before? This particular thing is totally new for me. I've done research in the field before. I'm a wildlife biologist and I worked in that field for a while. . . . But I don't know much about ocean ecology.

What will your days be like on the ship? We're collecting data on Right Whales, the North Atlantic Right Whale. It's an endangered species. There are only about 300 individuals worldwide. They identify the whales. They take biopsies, and they have genetic information on each whale. . . . I'll learn a lot (when) I get on there but I would guess they're going to do some kind of surveying as far as what they eat. So we might be doing some capture about how much food is there for them to eat. And also they do some work on vocalization.

How are you planning to incorporate your work into your classroom? I'm going to be writing about four blogs a week and the blogs will be interactive in the sense that I have to report like a scientist on what we're doing and then I have a section that's called "The Personal Log." And I can make that more individualized. I'll be bringing in stuff I taught the kids before like ecology. . . . I've had sound units. I had a genetics unit. . . . They can respond to me with some questions, which I will answer in future blogs.

Twelve days is a long time. Are you worried about getting seasick? When I was younger, I could do anything and never get seasick . . . but I haven't been on a really rocky boat for a while. . . . You're stuck out there and if you do get sick, you get sick. And there is a medic on the ship and they'll take care of you as best they can, and your body will adjust. . . . I'm just hoping that doesn't happen, obviously.

O'Donnell will write about her trip at teacheratsea.wordpress.com.

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