

COASTAL CHARACTER

Ridgely Kelly: A young environmentalist

by Chris Chase
Coastal Journal staff

BREMEN — Around this time of year, most 12-year-olds are focused on having as much fun as possible before their holiday vacation ends.

Ridgely Kelly, a 12 year old from Bremen, is busy handling interviews about the \$5,000 Barron Prize he and his friend Josiah Utsch won for the fundraising campaign they organized and managed themselves.

The Barron Prize was founded in 2001 by author T. A. Barron, and is given to people between the ages of 8 and 18 who have made a significant contribution to the well being of either people or the environment. Each year just 25 young people receive the award, and only the top ten winners — which Kelly and Utsch are among — receive the \$5,000.

According to Kelly, the journey started back in 2011, when Utsch read an article in the New York Times about the plight of the nautilus, an increasingly rare sea creature that has been in oceans for over 500 million years.

"They talked about how it could be in danger due to overfishing," said Kelly. "And he really had a passion for the nautilus. So he tried to find a donation, so he could donate to the nautilus."

But despite his efforts, Utsch couldn't find a single

fund that was devoted to protecting and researching the animal. Instead of giving up, however, he took matters into his own hands, and brought the idea to Kelly.

"He called me, and I designed the logo, for, I guess, our organization," said Kelly.

The two created a website — savethenautilus.com — and created and sold T-shirts with the logo on it to raise money. Utsch got in touch with Peter Ward, a researcher working to learn more about the nautilus by studying it in the wild, and pitched the idea of raising money to help with his research.

Through their own efforts, and the Barron Prize, the two have managed to raise over \$20,000 for the purchase of high resolution underwater cameras. They also got to take a trip with Ward to Samoa to participate in some of the research.

"His research is going towards protecting the nautilus, because we need to learn more about them before we can protect them," said Kelly.

Currently there is very little protection for the nautilus, and overfishing is rapidly depleting its population. The unusual creature has a very interesting and pretty shell, which is often used to make jewelry. Kelly said that raising awareness of its plight is an important part of their mis-



Contributed photo

Ridgely Kelly (and dog Truffle) is co-creator of an international fundraising campaign devoted to saving the nautilus.

sion.

"If we raise awareness, people will be more reluctant to buy it," said Kelly. "It's kind of like elephant tusks."

Kelly has been an animal lover for most of his life, and has had a wide variety of pets: From tree frogs and mice to pigs and goats. Protecting animals stemmed naturally from his love for wildlife.

"There's no animal that's not worth protecting," said Kelly.

Currently, due to lack of knowledge about the nautilus, the overall effect of its loss from the ecosystem is

hard to determine.

"All animals have a certain impact on the ecosystem. The otters eat the urchins that eat the kelp. If the otters don't eat the urchins, then the urchins eat all the kelp and then starve," said Kelly. "The nautilus is not an exception. If the nautilus were to go, we don't know what would happen."

Although they have already surpassed the \$10,000 goal set at the start of their campaign, according to Kelly, the website and the mission will continue as planned.

"I think we're just going to continue collecting donations, and try to spread awareness," said Kelly.

As for Kelly's future, well, that's a little less certain. He'll have to get through high school before he makes any concrete commitments.

"I don't know. Maybe if something comes up. This is, right now, what we're doing," said Kelly. "This is more in our capabilities."

To learn more about Kelly and his cause, visit savethenautilus.com.

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