



OCEAN DEFENDERS

Words by India Stephenson | Graphics by Sig Torre



The flurried movements of a hyacinth macaw swoops overhead, its deep blue plume frantically signaling its heightened state of distress to the kiteboarders below. Locked within the frames of the new Ocean Defenders comic, this endangered species character sends an existential SOS message to an animated Paula Rosales, who pauses her kite to address the parrot. Gifted with the power to communicate with animals, Paula listens as the bird describes Brazilian farmers burning down the Amazon forest to make way for agriculture fields. The slash and burn method is destroying their aviary habitat, causing massive erosion and clogging rivers while setting off a chain of causality that is killing fish and other wildlife. What will Paula's animated character and her team of Ocean Defenders do about it?

Rendered in the saturated inks and paneled layout style of a manga comic, this kiteboarding-themed environmental story takes the inherent extreme athletic skills of professional kites and gifts them with supernatural powers, turning them into kiteboarding heroes that help solve the world's environmental problems. Ocean Defenders' message is aimed at the next generation, getting kids at a young age to comprehend the world as a connected fabric as well as explain that the decisions of humanity are large enough to tip, alter and damage the environment. If ocean conservancy and environmental awareness are typically layered topics often explained to adult audiences, the Ocean Defenders series attempts to transmit ocean conservation awareness to younger audiences with the added punch-up appeal to kiteboarders of



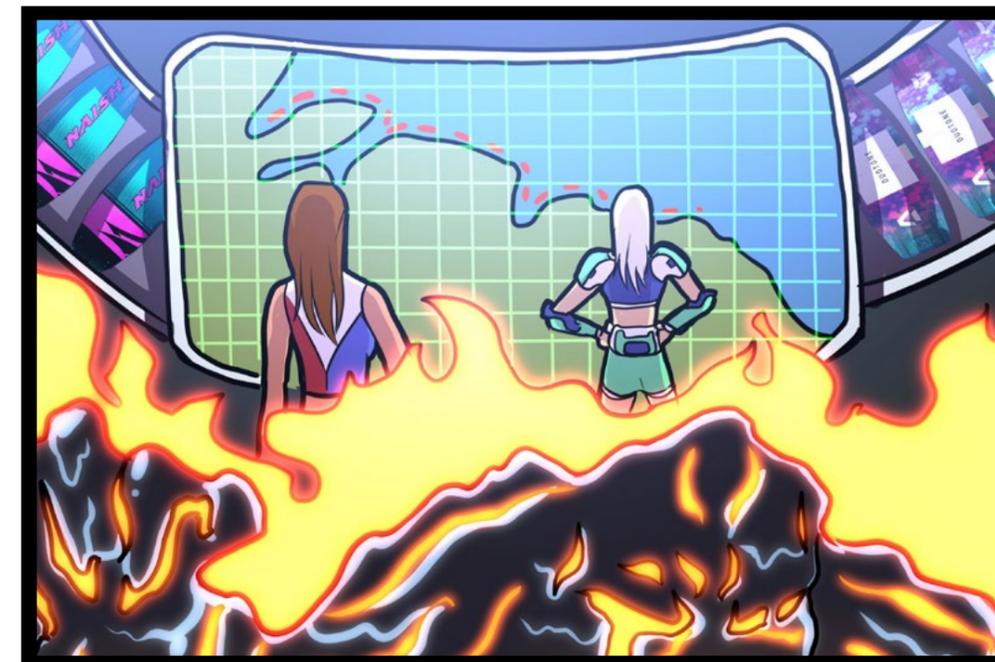
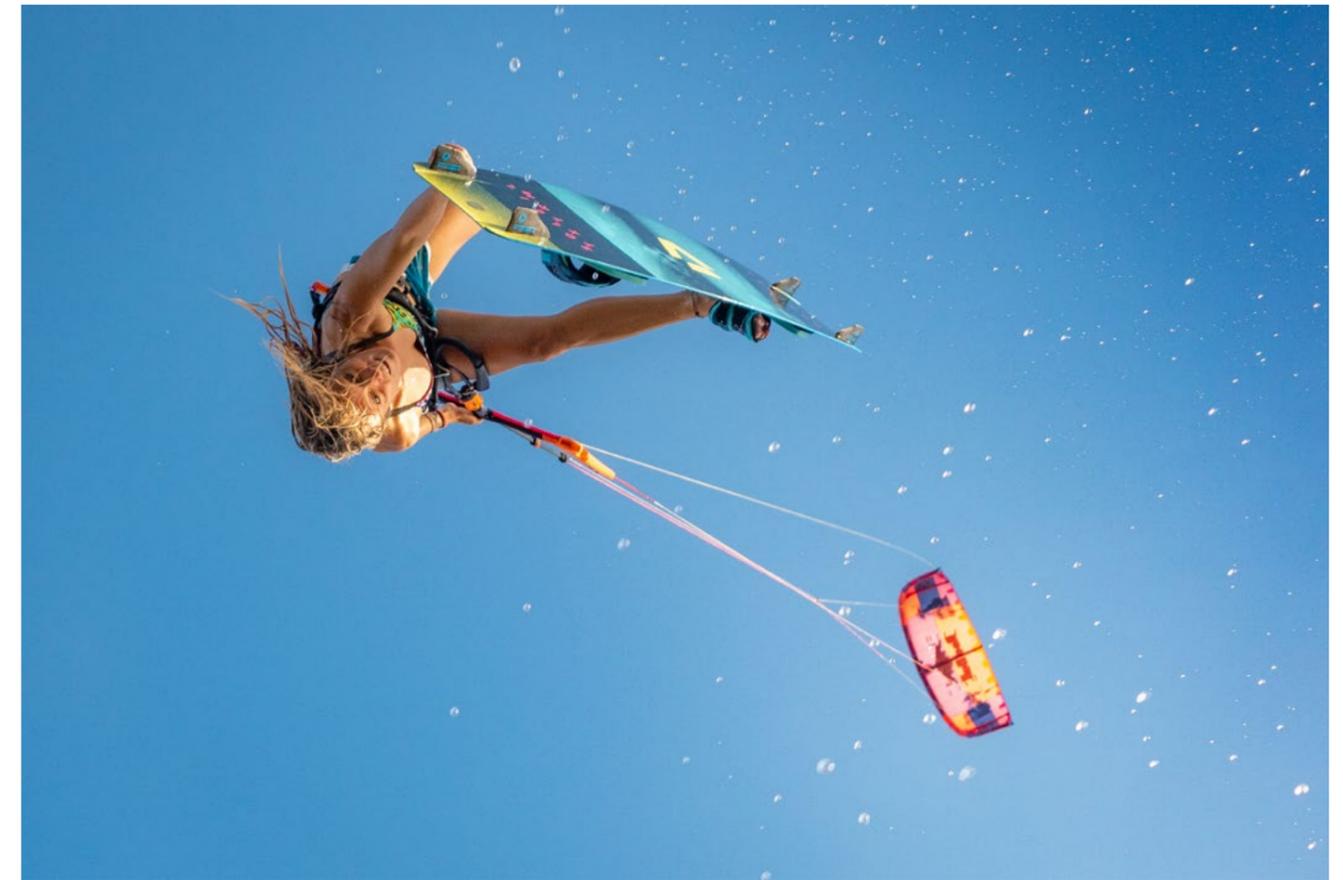
LEFT: Inspired by the rapid burning of the Amazon in 2019, Paula and Susi created Ocean Defenders to bring attention to the environmental destruction wrought by the slash and burn techniques used to open up more land to farming. RIGHT: Mr. Ocean facilitates the Ocean Defenders and helps them identify environmental threats, transmitting information on the downstream effects of widescale erosion on marine mammals.

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all ages. The comic brings structural awareness to environmental issues and the domino effect of those global problems. It also suggests to the reader that individuals can become heroes both by educating themselves and, more importantly, by taking action.

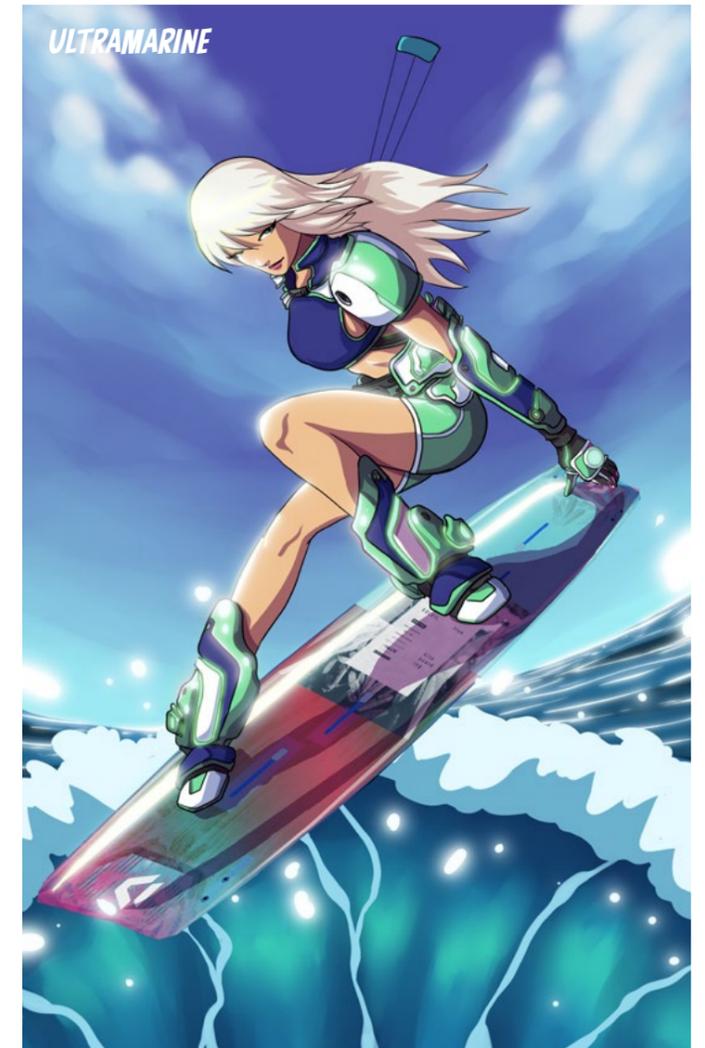
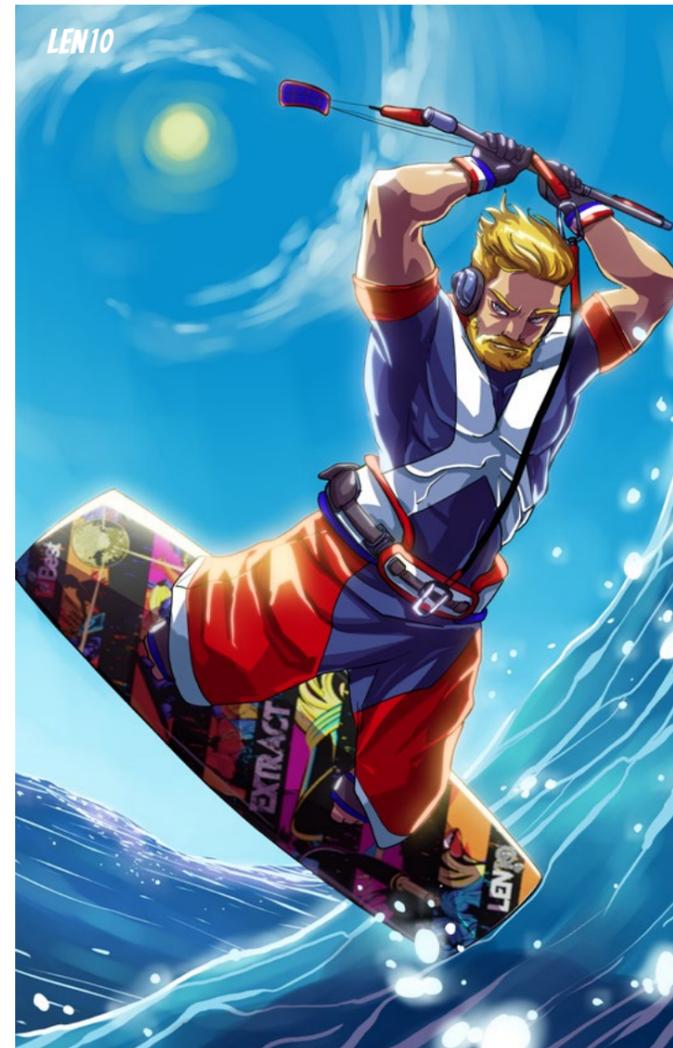
In the last few years, there have been increasing anecdotal headlines of biblical-level disasters that are lowering the standard of living for communities around the world. We've seen wildfires of unimaginable scale in the American West, Turkey and Greece. Last year, Germany experienced record rainfall that wiped out entire farms while extreme heat records have been set in every corner of the world. The Atlantic's hurricane alley is experiencing a frequency and ferocity that is showing no sign of abatement while the Arctic is melting at unforeseen rates and changing ocean currents. Our infrastructure is wholly unprepared for the changes that lie ahead. It's quite easy to deny abstract scientific conclusions about environmental degradation, but when it comes knocking on your front door and impacts your way of life, it's much harder to dispute these inconvenient truths. The coded message within the ocean action comics is that the world is much more sensitive to human ingenuity than previously thought and that it's essential we make effective changes in the next few years.

This educational comic concept is the creative brainchild of kiteboarding athletes **Paul Rosales** and Susi Mai. Having both grown up in tropical windsports destinations in developing countries, they've witnessed the common environmental problems that arise in rapidly developing tourism economies. They've seen first-hand the environmental degradation caused by neglected infrastructure as well as the lost cultural values of environmental stewardship. Having traveled the world as professional athletes, they've experienced insufficient trash collection service and underfunded sewage systems that spill over into public waters, noting the bigger picture that these effects have on their environments. With a combined experience of 20 years running kiteboarding events, Susi and Paula began putting together all-girls kite camps in their home countries and then expanded them into events like the Wind or No Wind Board Jam, Mai Tai, and the Maui Kite Fest. Paula has always tried to cross-breed an environmental or community give-back element into her events, encouraging athletes and participants to engage in beach cleanups or inspire local school children to care for their oceans amidst the glittery backdrop of kiteboarding magic. In 2018, Susi co-founded the Ultramarine Ocean Summit with retired technology entrepreneur and artist Jeremy McKane to



FAR LEFT: Paula Rosales blends her status as a professional kiteboarder and event promoter to inject environmental awareness into all of her projects. // Photo BrenStormin ABOVE: Co-founder of events like the Mai Tai, Susi uses her connections as a platform to promote ocean conservancy. // Photo Oli Dadswell LEFT: Susi and Paula's avatars, Ultramarine and Radheart, review their **downdwind** route to get to the scene of an environmental disaster.

MEANWHILE BACK AT HEADQUARTERS...



FAR LEFT: The Plastikman character is inspired by famous DJ Richie Hawtin whose superpowers allow him to spin the ocean's pollution into musical beats. MIDDLE LEFT: Paula's character, Radheart, is gifted with the ability to communicate with animals, which helps her understand the plight of endangered species. In essence, she is a **Canary** whisperer, capable of deciphering the environmental truths that lay in the proverbial coal mine.

RIGHT: Len10 is, of course, the heroic Ruben Lenten who uses superhuman strength to combat the threats to our oceans. RIGHT: Susi's Ultramarine character can summon the power of wind to fight environmental injustice.

connect non-profit organizations with government leaders and facilitate change through ocean stewardship. With their mutual experiences in marine awareness education, Paula and Susi created their comic series to educate children specifically on key environmental issues that are affecting oceans.

The concept of modeling lifestyle and behavioral choices to young kids goes back to Paula's personal experience growing up in a large city in the Philippines. As a child, she recalls watching the Rocket Power TV show on the Nickelodeon channel. The 90s cartoon follows three action sports-oriented kids who surf, skate and sometimes kite the California coast. "When my mom asked me what I wanted to do for vacation,

I told her I wanted to go surfing," Paula recalls. That TV show encouraged Paula to look beyond her urban experience and seek out an ocean-based action sports lifestyle that has influenced her career. Today, Paula operates the Aman Kite & Surf Centre on Pamalican Island in the Philippines. She spends a lot of time teaching kiteboarding to kids, and from that, she's learned how to inspire and motivate them. With simple acts like comparing upwind body dragging to flying like a superhero, Paula has learned how to engage children's imaginations and ambition to learn. Combining her teaching experiences with her formal education in communication, media and psychology have been crucial tools that influence the direction of this comic series.

Each comic frames a story arc around a human-generated environmental impact and uses kiteboarding superhero characters to solve the problem. The Defenders take the form of illustrated avatars—there's Susi (Ultramarine) and Paula (Radheart), along with other professional athletes like Ruben Lenten (Len10). Sir Richard Branson makes a cameo and Mr. Ocean, a likeness of Ultramarine's co-founder Jeremy, facilitates the group's missions. Unlike most kiteboarders, the Ocean Defenders are willing to interrupt a perfectly good session to get to the root of the environmental issue at hand.

Each character is gifted with a unique superpower that helps them save dolphins, stop algae bloom red tides and reef bleaching

as well as combat offshore oil rig spills. Paula's superpower is the ability to communicate with animals, a power she received when her hometown water supply was contaminated and caused a mutation. Susi has the power to control the wind, which allows the Defenders to use their kites to travel the globe (without purchasing carbon offset credits), and Ruben Lenten is fittingly gifted with superhuman strength. World-famous DJ and kiteboarder Richie Hawtin is embodied as Plastikman (also his DJ handle) and has the very convenient ability to turn the ocean's over-abundance of plastic particles into soundwaves. Equally important, the Defenders engage with scientists to help them understand complex ecological problems. Not only does the platform highlight the superheroes' selfless desire to do good,

it also exposes the work done by real-life ocean conservationists and credits the scientists, marine biologists and conservationists as equally important characters in solving the problems facing the world.

In addition to the comic, the Defenders team hopes to port the series into moving animation, create content viewed in virtual reality environments, like the Oculus 3D platform, as well as develop an app that will allow kids and kiteboarders alike to create their own avatars and spread the message throughout social networks. Returning to the fundamental purpose of the comic, the goal is to recruit and inspire a conservation mindset in current kiteboarders as well as to influence and educate future generations. The comics are intended to make us think about our individual choices that collectively degrade the health of our oceans, help us embrace objective scientific truth and nourish our inner superhero—instilling the selfless impulse to make the world a better place. [Tkb](#)



ABOVE: Bringing government, scientists and private actors together to act on ocean conservancy, Susi leads a discussion at the [Ultra Marine Summit](#) on Necker Island. // Photo Matthias Ruby BELOW: Sir Richard Branson joins the technology-driven Ocean Defenders to combat the existential threats to ocean ecology.



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