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ON SUNDAY

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WATER WARRIORS

Meet the women on the
front line in the battle for
the future of our oceans

FRANCES WHITING

The long and
short of men
with beards

SPECIAL LIFTOUT

School holiday
fun guide

SAVE THE CHILDREN

Town unites to
help Ugandan
orphans



 MOVIES + MUSIC + ARTS + THEATRE + FASHION +
FOOD + SOCIALS + WHAT'S ON + WEDDINGS + BABIES

STARS OF THE SEA

Marine biologists – most of whom are women – are converging c
take advan PHOTOGRAPHY er the world to
ADAM ARMSTRONG, CAMERON LAIRD rich facilities,
& LUKE MARSDEN
explore our reef and help save our endangered
animals. Three self-confessed ‘water chicks’ tell
their stories of the deep

BY LEANNE EDMISTONE
& MIKE BRUCE

Day dawns bright, clear and cool over Yeppoon’s Rosslyn Bay marina.

It appears to be the perfect day to become one of the very few people in the world to observe Australia’s only endemic dolphin, the snubfin, in its natural habitat at heritage-listed Balaclava Island, 60km south.

Unfortunately, after 20 minutes slowly punching through waves whipped by a strong southerly, conservationist Lydia Gibson and researcher Dr Daniele Cagnazzi turn our tinnie back into the sheltered bay to wait for better conditions.

Five years ago, Gibson, a British-born marine biologist, made Australia her home, our oceans her cause and saving the snubfin her personal legacy.

Discovered in 2005 when scientific studies distinguished it from southern Asia’s irrawaddy dolphin, there is believed to be less than 1000 of the shy, elusive species left in about 12 known “hotspots” along the northern coastline of Australia – four of which are in Queensland.

It was the first time in more than five decades that a new dolphin species had been named anywhere in the world.

Coastal development is the major threat to the dolphin,

along with net entanglement, boat strikes and the effects of climate change.

“We’ve been doing our best, but . . . a lot of people don’t even know it’s on their doorstep. It’s so important to keep getting the message out there because our studies have shown that we could lose the dolphin within three generations,” says Gibson, formerly of World Wildlife Fund and now with Wild Mob.

“It’d be really sad to lose the dolphin before most Australians have even had the chance to get to know it.”

Enthralled by dolphins since seeing mothers and calves cavorting off the Scottish coast when she was 11, the self-described “water chick” worked all over the world while gaining her masters in marine mammal biology.

“Teachers and lecturers would tell me it’s such a (female) cliche and a pipedream to think I could work with whales and dolphins, but I’m stubborn and said no, I *will* do it. I think that comes through in my conservation campaigning. Why am I fighting the oil and gas giants? Because there’s got to be a way.”

Listed as “near threatened” by the Queensland



Government and subject of a WWF push for the Federal Government to upgrade to “endangered”, the snubfin is named for its short dorsal fin and grows up to 2.7m. Uniquely, it spits jets of water when hunting, presumably to startle fish into swimming towards it.

Gibson clearly remembers her 30th birthday on May 23 this year for the worst reason – it was the day the bodies of two snubfin dolphins were found weighted with cement and tied to mangroves near Toolakea Beach, north of Townsville. It is believed the mammals drowned in fishing nets. WWF offered a \$5000 reward for information but no arrests have been made.

“Legal protection is just one of the tools in the whole toolbox,” argues an impassioned Gibson. “It’s an essential tool but it’s not the silver bullet. What we need are sanctuaries to protect their habitat, more research and even more indigenous rangers to be out there monitoring and managing the populations.”

Her focus now is on working with the Fitzroy Basin Association, the Capricorn Conservation Council and other groups to stop Xstrata’s \$1 billion, 35-million-tonne-capacity Balaclava Island Coal Export Terminal (balaclavaislandcoal.com.au) proposed for between Rockhampton and Gladstone.

A Xstrata spokeswoman says an environmental impact statement will be released later this year for public comment. The project would create about 800 construction and 100 operational jobs.

“Research has shown the snubfin dolphin and other inshore dolphins co-exist with ports around Australia and around the world,” the spokeswoman wrote in a

statement. “Therefore Xstrata Coal is confident we could build and operate the proposed terminal sensitively to allow it to co-exist with the dolphins.”

Conservation groups are not so sure. Of particular concern to the basin association’s Shane Westley is that approval for this facility would open the door for other developments waiting in the wings.

Westley says it would have a devastating impact not just on this southern-most population of snubfin dolphins, but on other threatened flora and fauna in the immediate area, as well as water quality flowing on to the Great Barrier Reef.

“(The eco-system) hasn’t been unchanged but it’s been relatively stable for a long time and you can see the environment down there is, at the moment, suitable for those dolphin,” he says. “To change that environment significantly, like will happen (if development goes ahead), means you could wipe out a population of dolphin.”

Gibson muses that in one way, the shy snubfin is its own worst enemy.

“From a human psychology point, to relate to things we have to experience them and, because they’re quite rare and it’s not often people see them, the connection isn’t there,” she says.

“It’s almost like the whole climate change issue. Unless it’s in your face and you experience it, that passion to protect isn’t as strong.

“For me, the dolphin is a symbol for the ocean, for what we’re trying to do. If the rainforest isn’t there, you can see that but when the ocean is being destroyed, nobody sees that. It’s just this body of water and ignorance is bliss.”



Protecting dolphins is linked to safeguarding the ocean for Lydia Gibson (left); and (above) with Daniele Cagnazzi.



Gibson says the work is relentless, and rewarding.

“You have to be optimistic to do the work I do, you have to have hope to keep pushing forward. I do see incremental steps forward. I do see a hell of a lot of challenges as well but there is an awareness that, compared to 30 years ago, wasn’t there before about the value of the environment.

“The most rewarding thing I found from conservation is you have to be across not only the science but the politics of the day and social situations, and you get to meet people from all walks of life.

“It’s really having that bigger picture and being able to create change at a much faster pace than if I was doing a PhD that may just end up on a shelf somewhere or if I was just wildlife guiding.”

Gibson is emphatic her commitment to the snubfin dolphin will remain unchanged. “I will continue to do what I can to save the snubfin dolphin. Really, that’s the legacy I want to leave here – to protect this dolphin and know I’ve done enough to save its future.”

It was love at first sight and a teenage Mariana Fuentes had a “hickie” as proof.

Dissuaded from becoming a wildlife vet after being chased by an enraged elephant in Zimbabwe, Fuentes discovered marine biology while swimming with manta rays on a visit to the Cayman Islands.

“Over there they have a foraging ground for manta rays. One of the rays attacked me, or,” Fuentes pauses, “sort of gave me a hickey on the back thinking I was food. I was talking to all the marine biologists there working on the project, I was very curious.”

The international reputation of James Cook University drew Fuentes, 29, from home town Sao Paolo, Brazil, to Townsville, where she did undergraduate, honours and PhD research into green, hawksbill and flatback turtle populations.

“If you look at a big green female turtle perhaps not everyone can see the beauty in them, but if you think about everything they have faced, all the battles fought, it’s quite amazing.

“It just amazes me that they have been around for so long and they have managed to survive, and at the same time they face

so many impacts.”

She laughs. “And, like everyone else, I think hatchlings are really cute!”

Dr Fuentes’s PhD thesis, which examined the impact of climate change (rising sea levels, increasing temperatures and cyclonic activity) on green sea turtles, found that because sand temperature determined the sex of hatchlings, rising temperatures would result in many more females in the population.

Now Dr Fuentes is a third of the way through a three-year project to look at priorities for managing turtle and dugong populations in the face of climate change.

“A lot of species’ resilience to climate change is a lot lower now than in the past and by mitigating the current threats that different animals are facing, we’re helping them be more resilient or have a better chance of adapting,” she explains.

“There’s more active management strategies that can be undertaken in the future, but obviously there’s a lot of study that still needs to go into this to determine their efficiency, the side effects of using those management strategies.”

Dr Fuentes credits Australia – which has some of the largest populations and nesting grounds for turtles – with a strong international reputation for its commitment to protecting the marine environment.

“We’re very fortunate here because Australia puts a lot more money into science and research. If you compare it to Brazil or other countries, that opportunity is not always there so I think that’s why a lot of people come here,” she says.

Dr Fuentes says while young women sometimes struggle to be taken seriously in academe (“They say in academe, it’s just when you have white hair that people start taking you seriously”), she was confident it was the right path for her.

“I really like asking questions and looking for answers, but I also try to undertake research . . . that would generate outcomes that would be used by managers or different communities; providing tools for people to make decisions.”

Each day, perched high on the hills above a cove in southeastern Japan late last year,



Nicole McLachlan would sit and watch the water run red with the blood of dolphins. She would hear the deathly thump of boat engines driving those dolphins and small whales into the cove. The din of slow-dying dolphins would bounce around the walls of the inlet – a din many have described as “screaming”.

It’s a tough gig for anyone; for someone who has dedicated their life to marine mammal conservation, it’s akin to torture. But McLachlan stuck to her task every day for three months. In fact, she’s heading back to the town of Taiji in a month to do it all again, to witness and document the annual drive-hunting and slaughter of small marine mammals.

McLachlan is driven by a passion to protect whales and dolphins or, as she calls them, “our friends in the sea”. She’s determined to change thinking and behaviour and educate future generations on the marine environment’s importance.

McLachlan is only 20. When she ventured to Taiji she was just 19, and was working with anti-whaling juggernaut Sea Shepherd, which made her an assistant campaign leader. “The hardest thing I found, at 19, was getting people to take me seriously,” she says.

But McLachlan isn’t just another loud activist full of well-meant youthful exuberance, another of Sea Shepherd’s “wearers of knitted beanies”, as conservative columnist Andrew Bolt calls them. McLachlan has credentials. She is in her third year of a degree in marine science and undertakes research from a base on Lady Elliot Island, in the southern Great Barrier Reef. She recognises that to be heard, it helps when you can blend the potency of academe with the gritty energy of activism.

McLachlan also attended this year’s

International Whaling Commission meeting on the British island of Jersey and saw how professors and researchers sat inside the meeting, while placard-wavers and marchers stood outside.

Growing up on a farm in NSW more than an hour from the nearest beach may not be the most obvious starting point for someone whose life revolves around the ocean.

But McLachlan says she’s had a “passionate love for the ocean and all living things in it” for as long as she can remember “and I don’t really know why”.

At seven she read the term “marine biologist” and began charting her path from there.

“When I read it I couldn’t help thinking how lucky are these people who get to be paid and have their whole career based in the wild. When I read those two words I knew I wanted to be that.”

She immersed herself in research and furthering her knowledge of the oceans. She first heard about the Taiji hunt when she was just 12 and so made contact with Sea Shepherd and began following the exploits of wildlife filmmaker Hardy Jones who, with actor Ted Danson, founded BlueVoice.org.

On top of her work with marine mammals, she’s also been active in protection of sharks and turtles and has supported Bob Irwin’s work on dugong protection in north Queensland.

Now McLachlan’s embarked on her own film project, a documentary with the working title, *In Our Hands*. She’s just back from Tonga where she documented the island nation’s booming whale-watching industry. It’s a call to arms targeting a teenage audience based on her own experiences of marine conservation,



her time in Taiji, the Pacific and at the IWC meeting.

“The whole message of *In Our Hands* is based around the idea that the future of the oceans is in the hands of younger people,” she explains. “They are the ones who are going to have to fix the mistakes of the past.”

McLachlan hopes to have the film out by next year along with an enormous mural-style banner she’s constructing, bearing the handprints of thousands of young people from around Australia. She hopes to present it at the 2012 IWC meeting – a more creative attention-grabbing alternative to yet another anti-whaling petition.

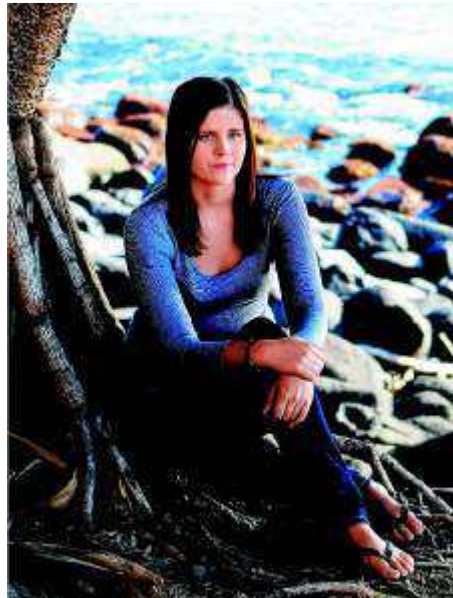
Meanwhile, McLachlan continues taking her message into schools, inspiring other young people to stand up and create

change. She has even considered taking her marine education crusade to developing countries with poor awareness of ecosystems and marine conservation.

But there’s a potent sub-text to McLachlan’s crusade – from one young person to others, to pursue your passion, to go for it.

“It’s about motivating and inspiring younger ones to educate themselves about the environment and other issues, or just pursuing their passion. I just love telling people to go out there and do it, live your dreams and pursue what you really want to do in life.”

Want to help save the snubfin? Sign a petition. Link from uonsunday.com.au



Passion drives Nicole McLachlan to endure the torture of witnessing an annual slaughter





Flatback turtles, creatures of beauty for Mariana Fuentes (above and top), who's working to help them adapt to climate change a shy snubfin dolphin at Balaclava Island.

