

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Nine bottlenose dolphins from the former Atlantis Marine Park are back in the wild for the first time in more than 10 years. The five adults were captured from the Yancheep area, north of Perth, in 1981.

The adults have been fitted with radio transmitters and will be extensively tracked during their first few months in the wild. Marine mammal expert and veterinarian Nick Gales is overseeing the research project, which is funded by the former Park's owners Tokyu Corporation.

Before the release, the dolphins had to be taught how to catch live fish and be gradually exposed to bacteria and parasites found in the natural marine environment.

The release and research program is a world first and offers some exciting opportunities. Researchers should be able to gather detailed information about dolphin home ranges and movements. They will see how the former captives associate with other wild dolphins.



A great deal of data on the wild dolphins of the area has already been collected, regarding pod size and structure, daily movements and foraging activity of the local dolphin population. The researchers can recognise more than 100 individuals.

Dolphins live in one area, and the former Atlantis dolphins were not expected to move far from the release site. The animals were taught to recognise and approach the research boat, so that their condition could be closely

monitored.

However, the animals' transition to the wild was not easy. The dolphins were at first reluctant to leave the enclosure at Two Rocks Marina that had been their home for the last three months.

It took two hours and dozens of fish before the three-year-old calves, which had been born in captivity, were tempted to make brief sorties out of the enclosure. However, over the next few days the dolphins became more confident and all left.

One dolphin, Mila, had a newborn calf, and another, Rani, is pregnant. Her calf will be born in the wild.

Sadly, Mila's calf has disappeared and Mila has lost condition. In the wild there high mortality rates of young dolphins, predators such as sharks to cope with, and even the possibility of harmful interactions with humans (such as getting entangled in fishing nets).

Since being released, however, the dolphins have provided a few surprises. Contrary to researchers' expectations, the female dolphins failed to stay together. Frodo, one of the males, has been seen as far south as Margaret River. Rajah and Echo lost weight and are being kept in the Two Rocks enclosure. The release will now have to proceed more slowly.



The former Atlantis dolphins are now the subject of an important study during their transition to the wild.

Photo - Nick Gales

The adults have been fitted with radio transmitters so as to track their movements.

Photo - Nick Gales

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME SEVEN NO. 3 AUTUMN ISSUE 1992



Each year more people seek wilderness experiences, but many are unprepared for the difficulties they might encounter. Learn about the basics of outback safety and bushcraft on page 35.



Botanists search for a eucalypt last seen by Giles in his expedition across WA deserts 115 years ago. See page 28.



Will the honey possum become a secondary victim of dieback disease? See page 22.



Australia is a land of lizards - tough competitors evolving amid spinifex and wildfires in the Great Victoria Desert. Turn to page 10.



Straight and vigorous pines don't grow by accident. Years of research and breeding have gone into producing the perfect pine. See page 49.

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COVER

The tiny honey possum (*Tarsipes rostratus*), seen in our cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky, feeds almost exclusively on nectar and pollen. However, most of its important food plants are threatened by dieback disease caused by the *Phytophthora* fungi. The endangered scarlet banksia (*Banksia coccinea*) is one plant species used by the possums that is highly susceptible to the dieback disease. See story on page 22.



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 Colour Separation by Prepress Services
 Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print

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Published by Dr S Shea, Executive Director
 Department of Conservation and Land Management,
 50 Hayman Road, Como, Western Australia 6152.