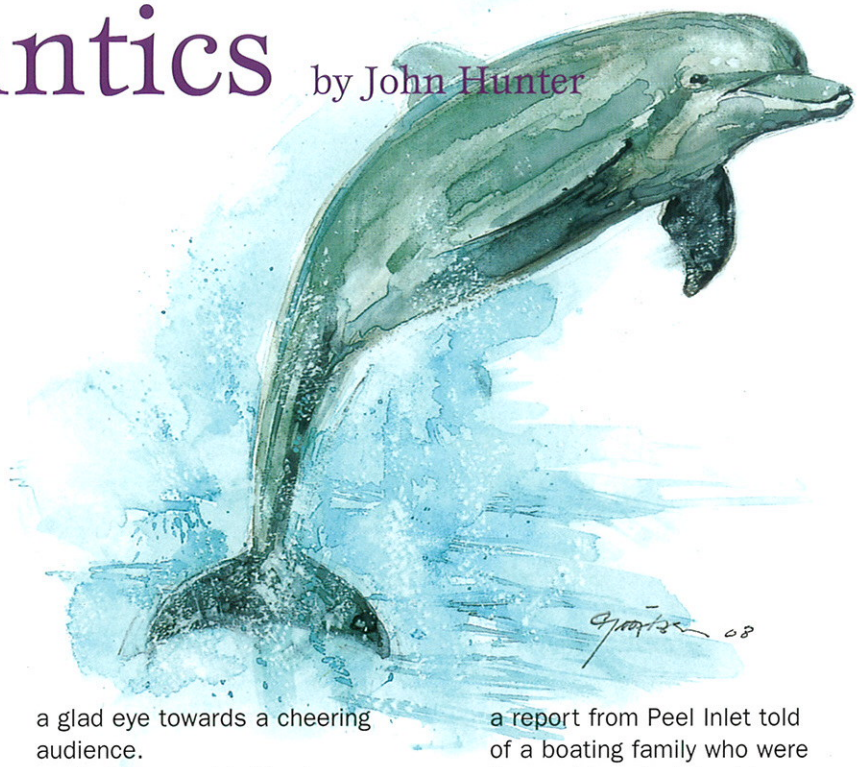
urban antics

by John Hunter

Karma



The salt spray always stung my cracked skin and froze my small thin frame, but mum said the ocean was good for me and that there was something out there to warm the cockles of my heart. Therapy or not, mum was always right.

As children we play along an ocean's edge searching for a crab, a starfish or a broken shell—believing always, as we look, we will find something new, or perhaps something very old.

We now know that our ancestors came from the sea and that in our collective imagination we may think the beloved dolphin is a distant cousin. There is no doubt, however, that this mammal always warms the cockles of our hearts.

The urban areas of many towns and cities in the south-west of the State have ocean or marine estuary environments that surround, entwine or abut them. It is entirely possible that most of the population, thereabouts, have had a dolphin experience.

The bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) regularly visits our shorelines and even stays within large estuaries for long periods, where it interacts with people. My first contacts were some 60 years ago when I spent many family holidays swimming, fishing and crabbing in the then backwoods of Coogee, Yunderup and Mandurah.

Times have changed but not so the enthralling contacts with dolphins. Even now, two small groups often plunder shoals of mullet some 50 metres from my office in Matilda Bay, Crawley. Here excited staff get a regular, recharge of life as the dolphins' power dashes and aerial leaps in the shallows create white-water mayhem. Now and then, the tiny short nose and melon head of a young animal entertains as it breaks the surface and casts a glad eye towards a cheering audience.

Bottlenose dolphins have a fascinating social structure. While they have a defined home range, members do change from time to time. They assist each other in fish herding, calf rearing and even mating, as males cooperate to herd a female in reproductive condition then take turns to mate with her. It is thought that this herding technique prevents rival groups from having access to her. Hmm... very considerate and protective.

Unfortunately the bottlenose dolphin, like its relative the whale, often strands, either singularly or in small groups. While there is much conjecture whether sonar and other human interference is at times responsible, natural events such as viral sickness, injury from fighting or tidal stranding resulting in severe sunburn are more the norm. Recently, a report from Peel Inlet told of a boating family who were thoroughly entertained by an animal with the number 20 on its dorsal fin. Department of Environment and Conservation records indicated that 'Twenty' was one of four dolphins that stranded when the tide changed in Lake Goegrup north of Mandurah on the Serpentine River in March 1997. All four were rescued and transported to deep water in their Peel Inlet home range. Officers freeze-branded (a painless process) the animals and listed their vital statistics before release. Such rescues and records are proving to be scientifically and thoroughly worthwhile.

Was this encounter a thank you, or just fate? Who knows, but female 'Twenty' at 2.03 metres long and a tad sunburned in 1997 was still going strong and from all accounts was very happy to see us again.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Bottlenose dolphins talk to each other using groans, grunts, whistles and squeaks.
- They find their favourite food—fish, squid and octopus—by making a series of clicks called echolocation.
- Each individual seems to have its own signature whistle, but it's the sounds we can't hear that may be the most important.

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