

Monkey Mia News

Issue 4 Spring 2001

DEPARTMENT OF
Conservation
AND LAND MANAGEMENT
Conserving the nature of WA



SHIRE OF SHARK BAY

Welcome to the fourth issue of Monkey Mia News.

This newsletter is produced twice a year, giving an update on what's happening in this important region, the Shark Bay World Heritage Area. Monkey Mia News is a non profit publication to give visitors an understanding of the happenings at Monkey Mia, including the important research undertaken in Shark Bay. Why not become a Monkey Mia Dolphin 'Friend' and receive regular newsletters and other benefits? See back page for details!

Worth waiting for...

a new visitor centre for Monkey Mia

Monkey Mia was abuzz with excitement on Tuesday 19 June 2001 with the long awaited opening of the new Visitor Centre.

The new facilities are the culmination of several years of planning, designing and consultation between the Department of Conservation and Land Management, the Shire of Shark Bay, the local community and State and Federal Government agencies, and will enable visitors to have a more rewarding experience during their visit to Shark Bay.

The Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Dr Judy Edwards, and Shark Bay Shire President Les Moss, officially opened the new centre with the launching of the dolphin cam and the unveiling of a plaque in honour of the occasion.

Open to the public for the first time was the interpretive centre

featuring land and seascape murals painted by Shark Bay's Artist in Residence Michelle Wardley. The centre has static and interactive displays with information about Monkey Mia Reserve, the Shark Bay World Heritage Area, dolphins and other marine life. The new facilities include a fish preparation area for dolphin feeds and an amphitheatre for holding talks, slide presentations, children's activities and outdoor movies. After the official opening, the Minister invited the public and the Shark Bay school children to stand in front of the dolphin cam and have their picture beamed across the world via the Internet.

Local residents, guests and tourists arrived en masse to enjoy a fun-filled afternoon and evening of activities at Monkey Mia. Children took part in ocean art and tried the new interactive displays. Michelle Wardley presented a display of her works and Fisheries WA presented information on caring for your catch and local fishing regulations.



A popular activity on the day was the opportunity to take a tour of the sail training ship Leeuwin II, moored offshore. The day's activities ended with a sausage sizzle and live music in the new amphitheatre. One of the highlights of the day was a presentation by Hugh Edwards, who related his recent adventures on a trip to the Falkland and Ascension Islands where he discovered the wrecks of William Dampier's vessel *Roebuck* and Louis de Freycinet's vessel *Uranie*. Both vessels have significant historical links with Shark Bay.

Continued page 2

Right: People posing for the dolphin cam. The image was beamed across the world via the internet.



Above: A view of the interpretive displays.

Department of Conservation and Land Management staff are developing a new program of environmental education activities to operate in the new centre and across other areas of the Monkey Mia Reserve. It is an exciting time for all involved and it is foreseen that the new Visitor Centre will enhance visitors' awareness of all aspects of the Shark Bay World Heritage Area and encourage them to explore the entire area of Monkey Mia and beyond.

If you would like to view the dolphin cam, visit www.naturebase.net

Boys just want to have fun

Just as human beings are highly social animals, so too are dolphins. From the moment they are born to the day they die, dolphins spend most of their time in company with other dolphins. While it may be of no surprise that some bonds are stronger than others, what may be surprising is that some of the strongest bonds of all occur between males, according to Dr Richard Connor who has studied male dolphin relationships since 1982.

When juvenile male dolphins are weaned, they tend to spend most of their time socialising with other males of a similar age. Over time this interaction leads to the development of long-term stable relationships, usually between two or three individuals. The bond that develops between these males is known as an 'alliance'. The level of bonding between alliance members is so strong that individuals stay together for a lifetime and are commonly seen swimming side by side. This is in contrast to the bond between male and female dolphins, where the interaction between the sexes is of a temporary nature, generally only spending time together during mating.

Why do male dolphins form alliances?

Researchers studying alliances offshore from Monkey Mia believe that male dolphins form tight-knit groups in order to

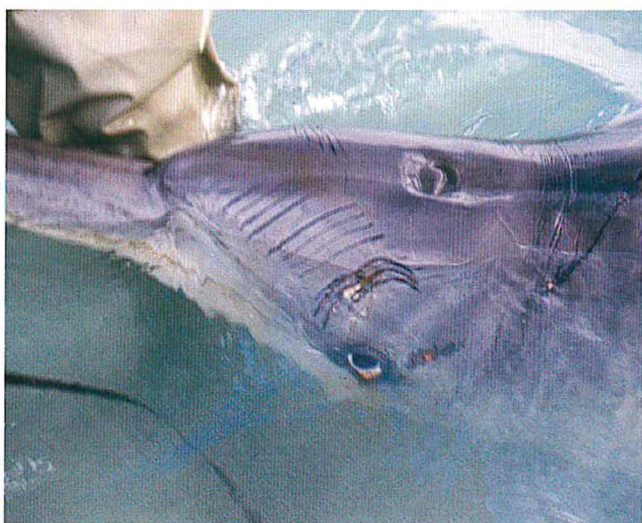
increase their chances of breeding success. As female dolphins have a relatively low reproductive rate, competition among male dolphins for access to females is intense. This is because most sexually mature females already have calves and therefore are not sexually receptive for three or four years.

By forming into groups the males can, in effect, 'monopolise' a female. This can be a coercive process where through aggressive behaviour, an alliance can force a female to join their group. Once a female has been 'herded' and joined an alliance, she will often stay with them for as little as a few hours or as long as a few weeks. It is during this time that the males within the alliance have their best chance to mate. It is likely that the female mates with multiple partners, and hence it is never known who fathers any of the calves.

Research at Monkey Mia has also revealed a high level of cooperation between different alliance groups. Two alliances may cooperate to 'steal' a female away from another alliance. It is during these moments that male dolphins are at their most aggressive. Displays of aggression may include tail slapping, biting, jaw snapping and bruising collisions.

Such aggression has been seen in the past from male dolphins at the beach at Monkey Mia, especially during the breeding season (November–February). As such, the management program now focuses on adult female dolphins and their female offspring, in order to sustain the human/dolphin interaction, which may have been jeopardised by the aggressive males as they deterred females from visiting the beach.

Alliance formation within the male dolphin population in Shark Bay is one of many examples of the very complex social interactions that occur within the dolphin world. However, there is still much more to learn about these beautiful and highly social animals.



Above: After six weeks of being herded by male alliances, Puck returned to the beach all beaten and scratched.

Caring for dolphins

To help preserve the unique experience of wild dolphins coming ashore and interacting with humans at Monkey Mia, a few simple guidelines have been developed:

No touching

Experience has shown that adult dolphins can become aggressive when being touched, and they are known to be susceptible to viruses transmitted through human contact. So enjoy watching the dolphins in their natural environment but please keep your hands to yourself.

Feeding the dolphins

Uncontrolled feeding of dolphins can be highly detrimental to their health. Dolphins receiving handouts of fish from boats or the beach become accustomed to scavenging and lose the natural instinct to hunt. They become unsociable to other dolphins and adult females with dependant calves have been known to ignore the needs of their young.

To ensure the dolphins at Monkey Mia don't suffer the fate brought about by inappropriate feeding, Department of Conservation and Land Management officers carefully supervise and regulate their feeding in the designated dolphin interaction area.

Swimming with dolphins

To ensure the protection of all dolphins, the Wildlife Conservation Act of WA prohibits swimming with them. If you are fortunate enough to come in to contact with dolphins when swimming, let them swim around you while you keep still. This will ensure that they won't feel threatened and can swim away when they wish.

So please - love the dolphins, but don't love them to death.

Pelican antics . . .

To some visitors, the pelicans at Monkey Mia are more interesting to watch than the dolphins. There are approximately 10 semi-resident pelicans that visit Monkey Mia on an almost daily basis from nearby Pelican Island, 24km to the east where they breed and roost. The pelicans entertain visitors with their antics as they wait for their ration of fish, which they are given while the dolphins are being fed to deter them from disrupting the dolphin feeds.

Weighing anywhere between four and eight kilograms, the Australian pelican is the largest of the world's seven pelican species. While hanging around on the beach in anticipation of the next feed, they spend their time preening themselves, sleeping and posing for photos with visitors!

Right: Pelicans at Monkey Mia enjoy a refreshing drink under the sprinkler.

These much-loved birds have personalities of their own and often display unusual and amusing behaviour. Are they just putting on a show or are there some valid reasons for some of the seemingly strange movements that pelicans make? To see a pelican with its open bill pushed skyward may look a little funny, but the bird is cooling itself down. Fluttering the floor of the pouch causes the body's rich blood supply to flow to the skin surface, bringing with it body heat which is then lost through evaporation and radiation.

Another comical sight is pelicans sitting in the rain with their mouths wide open. The birds are collecting fresh rainwater in their beaks that they then drink to quench their thirst. At Monkey Mia you may see the pelicans sitting under the sprinkler with their beaks wide open for exactly the same reason. Pelicans can drink salt water when fresh water is not available as they have a gland located above and behind their eyes, which removes excess salt from their bodies by discharging it through the nasal passages as a highly concentrated saline solution. The pouch of a pelican's bill can hold up to 10 litres of water, but only when the bird is scooping for fish. It is very sensitive and actually helps the bird to locate fish in murky water.

Perhaps the most humorous of scenes is a pelican chick grabbing its leg in its bill and rolling around on the ground for anywhere up to 30 seconds. It does this to gain the attention of the parent bird in the hope of getting more food! Maybe not as silly as it looks then!

Of the two sexes, the male pelican is the bigger, more domineering bird and has a longer bill than the female. A pelican's wingspan can measure between two and three metres, and they can fly up to 1000 metres above sea level. When they get into thermal currents they use the warm air to elevate them up to 3000 metres! They can stay aloft for up to 24 hours and reach speeds of approximately 55 kilometres per hour. Just perfect for cruising on their long migrations around the continent.

So if you ever thought the life of a pelican was dull and boring, you may want to reconsider. Or maybe it's just the Monkey Mia pelicans that have got it so good!!



Dolphins of Monkey Mia Research Foundation

The mission of the Dolphins of Monkey Mia Research Foundation is:

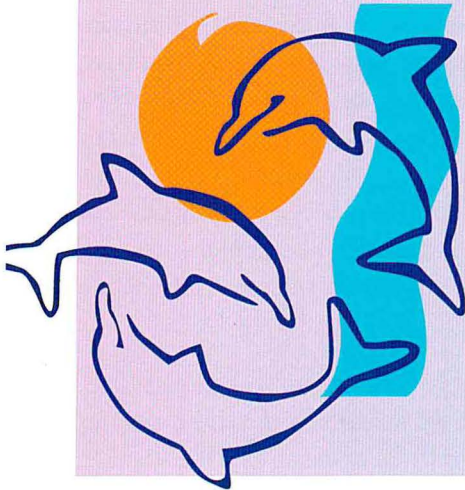
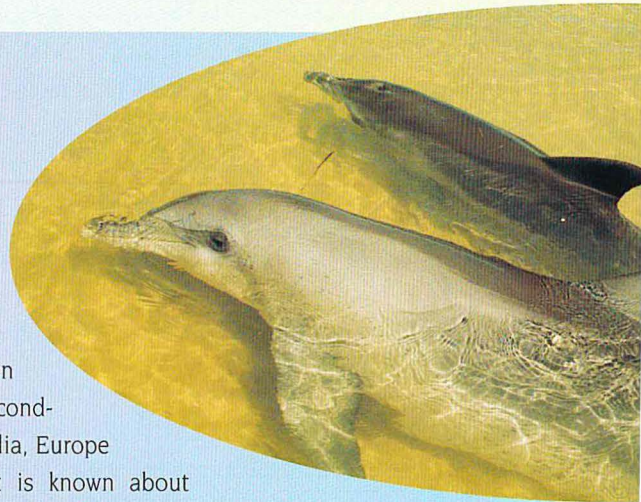
'To better understand and protect the dolphins and wildlife in Shark Bay through research.'

Long-term research on the Shark Bay and Monkey Mia dolphins has been conducted by an international team of researchers since 1982. This is the second-longest running dolphin project worldwide. Researchers come from Australia, Europe

and North America. Most of what is known about dolphin behaviour, social structure and ecology, comes from the Shark Bay team. *The Dolphins of Monkey Mia Research Foundation* was established in 1998 to support the long-term research on the Monkey Mia and Shark Bay dolphins. Your donations will help protect and monitor more than 600 dolphins and will assist in this exciting scientific endeavour! Contributions to research can be forwarded to the address below.

For more information, please contact us by mail or through our website.

The Dolphins of Monkey Mia Research Foundation
PO Box 140, Claremont, WA 6010
www.monkeymiadolphins.org



The Monkey Mia Dolphin Friends Membership

You will receive a copy of the Monkey Mia learning package and a discount voucher for entry to Monkey Mia (valid for one year)

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