FINDING SANCTUARY

The wild dolphins of Adelaide's Port River helped save Melody Horrill. But can she save them?

Photography Julian Kingma

When I first jumped into the water with Jock the wild dolphin, it was the most remarkable experience I had ever had. His skin felt like cool satin, his sonar clicks seemed to vibrate through my body and he particularly enjoyed being tickled on his tummy. I knew he was checking me out; when I looked into his eyes I could see intelligence, curiosity, and a twinkle of mischievousness. For the first time I felt pure joy interacting with a wild being whose only reason for being there with me was because he wanted to. There was no other enticement, no free fish, no coercion. I felt no fear, no hesitation; I revelled in the freedom of the moment and the wonder of it.

We played and swam together in the waters of the Port River, an estuary 15km from Adelaide, during research trips undertaken with Dr Mike Bossley, who began studying these bottlenose dolphins in 1988 after stories surfaced of one swimming with racehorses training in the river. A small group of us would go out with Mike, and we quickly came to know Jock as he always seemed eager to interact with us. If we didn't get into the water quickly enough, he would bang the boat ladder. If our feet were hanging over the edge of the boat, he would sometimes gingerly grab one with his mouth and gently give us a pull. On one occasion when I was swimming in shallower water, Jock pushed his snout under my feet as if to stop me sinking to the ocean floor.

He was an adolescent dolphin with a severely mangled dorsal fin – a result of being entangled in fishing line and hooks multiple times. Strangely, he never interacted with other dolphins; he was an outcast. I felt he and I were kindred spirits, both scarred by our history, both solitary, shunned creatures seeking some kind of connection. He taught me to revel in the joy of the moment, to play, to trust, to explore. Just being in the water with him and the other dolphins soothed my soul, providing a connection to something far greater than my sad past. Adelaide's Port River dolphins saved me. I hope I can now help save them.

It's Christmas day 1981; I am 13 years old. I am sitting on my bed in a small weatherboard house in Brighton, in Adelaide's southern suburbs,

listening to Australian Crawl blare from my tape-deck. The volume is turned to maximum in a vain attempt to drown out the screaming from my parents' bedroom next door. I hear a thump – it's my brother Mark slamming his bedroom door. Then comes a crash from my parents' room and I know what it is before I even get up to investigate. I walk into the room and I see blood running from my mother's mouth as she sits on the floor beside a broken lamp. She is spitting blood as she screams obscenities at my father, whose face is red with rage. His hands are balled into fists. Neither acknowledges my presence. "Leave her alone!," I scream at my father, tears streaming down my face. He turns to me and says, "Get out you stupid girl." I don't feel the sting of his words, as I've heard them so many times before: *I'm an idiot who will never amount to anything; I will end up just like my mother; I was a mistake and always will be...*

My lack of response triggers a fresh bout of rage. He lashes out, smacking me across the face, and I fall to the floor next to my mother. Sobbing, I run to Mark's door and yell at him to do something. He mutters to just leave them to it, it'll be over soon. But I can't leave it alone. I run to the hall and call the police. When they turn up, some of their faces are familiar; they've been here often enough before, but the violence always hits a crescendo at Christmas. My parents aren't heavy drinkers; their cocktail of choice is 12 months' worth of leftover rage, hatred and frustration, served up steaming on Christmas Day.

The police broker an uneasy peace but I can still feel the tension. I venture outside, sit on the back porch and cuddle my cat. My mother tends to her bloodied lip and nothing more is said. There is nothing more to say. It's how life is. Mark and I have lived this hellish existence our entire lives.

We'd moved to Adelaide from England in 1976, leaving two older sisters behind. My father was born in Sri Lanka and as a young man moved to the UK, where he met my mother. The arguing was always extreme, often triggered by my mother's frustration at our lack of money and the house my father chose to buy. She knew how to push his buttons and his response was always explosive. Inevitably the verbal abuse spiralled into brawls resulting in injuries on both sides. Mark and I often tried to intervene when the situation evolved to knives or flying furniture. He and I suffered many blows in our attempts to broker peace, often hiding the bruises under clothing or missing school completely. Not that missing school ever worried me. I was an outcast; I was bullied mercilessly and had few friends.

After a particularly vicious brawl in Adelaide in 1984, which left my mother with a bloody nose, I'd had enough. I told her we had to leave before someone was killed. I had just turned 16. We moved into a small flat, but my father started stalking our new home. His behaviour became so bizarre, the police suggested my mother and I should live separately. So I stayed in the flat and she moved in with her new boyfriend.

In mid-1985, as my mother walked into my apartment, my father ran up behind her. I screamed out a warning but it was too late. He grabbed her by the neck, pushed her to the ground and plunged a corkscrew into her face, just below her right eye. She fell into the flat, blood gushing from the wound. Grabbing a towel, I slowly unscrewed the object, trying to remain calm while my mother screamed in agony. I called the police and realised in horror that I hadn't locked the door. I ran to the entrance where I was met with the sight of my father lying in a pool of blood. He had self-inflicted injuries to his throat.

The rest of that day was a blur of TV news crews, police officers and detectives. My parents were rushed to hospital. They both survived. Apparently, my quick response had saved my father's life. My mother was lucky not to have been blinded. The corkscrew missed vital nerves, but she still lives with scarring and sinus problems.

I testified against my father in court, where he hurled abuse at me from the dock. He was sentenced to 18 months' jail. It was a very dark time for me but the detective leading the case was a ray of light and regularly checked up on my welfare. Late last year I tracked him down and thanked him for his crucial support.

In the wake of all this I felt lost and rudderless. I feared I would never escape this nightmare. I had a supportive boyfriend, but I realised my only hope was to change my future through education and so I enrolled in a part-time Year 12 course at TAFE. My father was released from jail and moved back into the family home but about six months later, a week before my final exams, I received a call from Mark. He had just identified my father's body. I felt a sense of relief. It was over. He had left a suicide note outlining his hatred of my mother, Mark and me, and disowning us as his children.

The college suggested that I delay my exams but I decided to sit them – and I earned a score high enough to get into uni. Shortly after my Year 12 graduation I learnt the police had uncovered a stash of homemade weapons in my father's shed, each carrying a label with one of our names on it. He had always prided himself on his engineering background and ability to make anything.

The prospect of going to uni terrified me but in 1990 I started my degree in communications at the University of South Australia while also working nights. I chose psychology as one of my majors, mostly in an attempt to understand my own circumstances. One of my first psychology lecturers was Dr Mike Bossley, a marine biologist and psychologist with a special interest in humans' lack of connection to nature. Mike explained that our disassociation with the natural world was messing with our heads and the planet. He had been studying the resident dolphins in the Port River for several years and had observed among them highly intelligent behaviour,

Special: Jock in the Port River; with the writer

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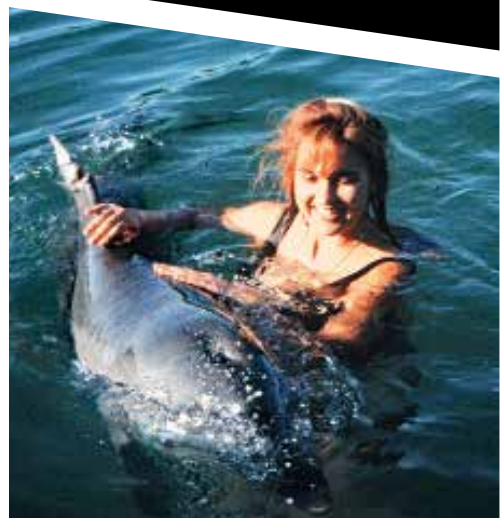

complex social groups, individual idiosyncrasies and an innate ability "just to have fun". He also suggested our species could learn a thing or two from them. I was hooked.

Over the next three years I joined Mike out on the water at least once a week. I became fascinated with the dolphins and got to know them well. Mike had named each one based on the nicks and notches in its dorsal fin; Two Notch, an older dolphin, would hang out with Captain Hook, who had an unusually curved dorsal. I grew to love them. I watched them hunt, play and raise their families; I rejoiced in new babies and expanding pods. I learnt more about their environment and the multiple threats they faced. My world and my mind slowly started to expand.

The Port River, while beautiful in many ways and an important fish-breeding ground, has been contaminated with industrial pollutants, storm water run-off and heavy metals. But despite all this, I saw it as my magical escape where the dolphins and Mike were my family. And then I met Jock, the solitary dolphin who spent most of his time obsessively circling a small old boat moored permanently in the river. He never interacted with other dolphins and Mike suggested it was because he had been orphaned at a young age and had never learnt social skills. I immediately connected with him – like me he seemed to be a lost soul and alone in the world.

As we spent more time in Jock's patch, he would leave his endless circling and approach Mike's boat. We would spend hours just watching him. One day Mike accidentally dropped a paddle into the water, and Jock immediately swam over and started playing with it before returning it to us. This paddle game went on for weeks and led to greater interaction, trust and physical touch.

At first we would reach out to Jock from Mike's boat, but then we took the plunge into his world. Mike had serious concerns about Jock's trust in us. We agreed we would try to use his connection with us to lure him out of his comfort zone into areas where the other dolphins lived. Over a period of months, we led Jock to other pods and he tentatively began to integrate.

One day we paid a visit, only to find him swimming in a different area of the river with a small pod of dolphins well known to us. For the first time, he didn't race over to greet us. Three of us on the boat looked on, all feeling elated and deflated at the same time – Jock was finally being accepted by his own. Although my heart was breaking, I knew it was the best thing for him. On the few occasions we saw Jock again he was still swimming with his dolphin mates.

I continued helping Mike with his research and spending time with the dolphins until I graduated in 1993 and accepted a position in PR. A few months into the job, Mike called me with shocking news: Jock was dead and the South Australian Museum was carrying out an autopsy. We discovered that Jock's death may have been related to his very high load of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). PCBs from industrial products can remain in the marine environment for decades and are known to weaken the immune system. In addition to this, subsequent overseas research has found that solitary dolphins generally live shorter lives, and befriending them often causes them issues. I know Mike often struggles with whether we did the right thing by becoming so close.

However, the tragic loss of Jock reaffirmed my belief that Mike's work with the dolphins should continue, so I quit my job and joined him and a handful of other volunteers to form the Australian Dolphin Research Foundation, a charity to fund Mike's work and raise public awareness about the Port River dolphins and their environment. In the following two years I found my voice and used it to educate communities about Adelaide's unique dolphin population and the perils they face. This frequent exposure eventually led to a full-time career reporting on environment and science, presenting Adelaide's weather for more than 10 years and then moving into other roles behind the camera.

In a landmark event in 2002, the South Australian government promised that the Port River and its surroundings would be declared Australia's first dolphin sanctuary – a decision influenced by a documentary I had made on Jock and the dolphins that I took to CNN. The sanctuary was proclaimed in 2005. Finally, it seemed these animals had some protection and their home would be secure.

But the journey is not over. The dolphins are in trouble again. Mike's research shows the number of resident individuals in the Adelaide Dolphin Sanctuary, usually around 30, has declined by about 30 per cent over the past three years, with only one in 13 calves surviving in the same period. Anecdotally, the number of dolphins being struck by boats or caught in fishing debris is rising. The sad reality is that government and volunteer efforts have not been enough.

There are ways to turn the tide. More funding is needed for the South Australian Museum to analyse the bodies of dead calves for disease and toxins – currently no one knows why so many are dying. While tourism, fishing and boating are important for the state's economy, we need to change our behaviour around dolphins to reduce our impact on their habitat. To this end, the State Government has reduced speed limits for boats in some backwaters. I have also recently connected with the state environment minister, who appears keen to explore ways of improving the situation – but it will require a concerted effort by government, industry, business and the community, as well as an increase in ranger numbers.

Mike, the dolphins and in particular Jock pulled me out of the darkness. They gave me hope and purpose, allowing me to wear my past as a badge of honour. Connecting to the natural world, finding peace in the ocean and unconditional acceptance from a wild dolphin restored my faith in love. I know many others have been helped, too. The question is, how can we repay the favour? ●

For help: 1800RESPECT 1800 737 732; Lifeline 13 11 14

Insights: a Port River field trip; Melody Horrill

A few months into the job, Mike called me with shocking news

PHOTOGRAPHY: MIKE BOSSLEY