



CLUB MARINE

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LIFE'S A BEACH

25 years through
the lens

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The Pod People

Everything about the Dolphin Research Institute is unique: its director, its methods and the dolphins it works so tirelessly to protect.

By Jeff Megahan

In October last year, Club Marine began a partnership with Australia's largest coastal community volunteer network, Coastcare. On behalf of its 140,000 members, Club Marine provides financial support for Coastcare's range of environmental programs, specifically five projects spread around Australia.

Across Australia there are 60,000 volunteers working in 2000 Coastcare groups. For over 20 years, the work of these volunteers has gone a long way to preserving Australia's fragile marine eco-system. However, the stories of these ordinary Australians have gone mostly unnoticed.



When Club Marine entered into its partnership with Coastcare, we decided that we would air their stories in *Club Marine Magazine*.

In this issue we cover the work of marine scientist Jeff Weir, Executive Director of the Dolphin Research Institute in Hastings, Victoria. Working over two decades with minimal government support, Weir has not only protected the dolphins of Port Phillip Bay, he has developed a world-class research and education centre.

Sixty-two kilometres south of Melbourne, in the Dolphin Research Institute's nondescript building in Hastings, Weir is at his desk, pouring

over plans for the 2009 'i sea, i care challenge'. By the end of January, Weir and his team will have travelled over 2500sqkm on Port Phillip Bay, stopping at 32 different locations along the way to teach Victorians about the wonders the bay has to offer.

The bay is visited by up to nine different species of whales and dolphins.

A tall, amiable man with a scraggly grey goatee, Weir is the kind of marine scientist that you could easily have a beer with. After 20 years as a researcher and educator, Weir's passion for protecting Victoria's marine environment remains strong, but is tempered by a rare ability to appreciate that every issue has two sides.

It has been these twin attributes, plus his ability to see the bigger picture, that has helped Weir create the influential research and education centre that the Dolphin Research Institute is today.

HISTORY

A founding member of the DRI, Weir has been there since the '80s. "When we started, we were an eclectic collection of people who wanted to protect dolphins," Weir recalls, "even though we didn't know what we were trying to protect them from."

From the start, he understood that the best way to protect the dolphins was to study them. His early plan was to gather and share information on the dolphins of Port Phillip Bay. If people got to know them, he reasoned, they would attribute value to them. And if they valued them, then they would protect them.

In the beginning of the DRI, funding was a problem. And times were tough. Weir battled for the financial resources to get focused, professional research out of young scientists each summer, and he got the program off the ground, just barely. "We had guys living in tents, and our 'research vessel' was a rubber inflatable that we had to beach three times a day to pump up," he says, remembering that first year.

From those humble beginnings, researchers developed a way of identifying the dolphins individually by their fins. Getting to know the fins was the best way to track the dolphins, so the



Using photographs, researchers can follow individual dolphins as they move throughout the bay.



researchers began a fin-photography database. Today, the DRI has over 40,000 photographs of dorsal fins. Using these photographs, researchers can follow individual dolphins as they move throughout the bay. They have also discovered

that, apart from the resident species, the bay is visited by up to nine different species of whales and dolphins.

As the research continued, became increasingly clear that it is impossible to understand the dolphins in isolation to their habitat. Out of necessity, the focus of the DRI broadened, with a wider research base. "While our research still concentrates on the dolphins, we began to see that protecting them meant protecting the whole marine environment," Weir explains.

As it happened, Port Phillip Bay is an amazingly diverse place to study. Because of its currents, many species of marine life exist in a sort of geographical isolation. That isolation has led to some interesting developments. The resident dolphins in Port Phillip Bay, for example, are genetically distinct from any other dolphin in the world. They're actually a new and separate species of dolphin, according to the results of recent DNA sampling.

ENVIRONMENTAL STANCE

Even back in the early days, Weir understood that in order to achieve real results politically, his organisation needed to take a balanced and



Above: Jeff Weir, the driving force behind the Dolphin Research Institute.

Below: 'i sea, i care' is the DRI's fun and informative educational outreach programme.



constructive stand on issues. "Rather than kicking heads and complaining and blaming, our goal was to create a dialogue," he explained. "If you can have a dialogue, then you can understand the issues and come up with a balanced solution."

This pragmatic philosophy was put to the test during the controversial dredging of Port Phillip Bay, which has come under fire from various vocal environmental groups. As Weir explained, the DRI had to tread carefully, especially since it was expected to come out against the project. "Our whole policy on the channel deepening issue is that we prefer it didn't have to happen," he said, "But I can tell you, the Port of Melbourne Corporation, which is spending millions on the project, wishes that it didn't have to happen either."

Weir's decision to keep an open mind about the project, while monitoring any potential effects on the dolphins, led to a few unpleasant phone calls from groups threatening to rake his reputation through the mud. "There are a lot of people out there who put a lot of energy into reminding everybody that the world's not perfect," says Jeff, speaking about some of the radical groups he's come up against, "and the only people they don't acknowledge aren't perfect are themselves."

"We figured the best thing we could do was to ensure that our research data would influence the outcome of the project" Jeff says, "And that's exactly what happened."

I SEA I CARE CHALLENGE

The launch of the DRI's 'i sea i care challenge' took place at St Kilda beach on a brilliant day in early January. On the foreshore, next to the harbour, Weir and his team of volunteers ran an informal educational outreach centre featuring dolphin physiology and informational placards about Port Phillip Bay. Meanwhile, out on the bay, members of the media were invited to join a team of marine biologists aboard the DRI's research vessel, a Savage Swordfish named *Delphinidea*.

As field research officer Dave Donnelly piloted the vessel through the light chop, research officer Sue Mason and a visiting humpback whale specialist were excitedly discussing dolphins and the environment of Port Phillip Bay. Topics of conversation went from the distinction between isotopes and nuclides to Latin etymologies to tissue sample collection techniques. But it wasn't



*Port Phillip Bay: come
for the sponges, stay
for the polychraetes!*

all laughs. Mostly, the scientists discussed how they could get people to appreciate the teeming array of marine life that Port Phillip Bay had to offer. More than anything else, they just want to share what they know.

At first glance, it seems like a tough sell. When marine biologists talk about the “teeming array of marine life” in Port Phillip Bay, they are mostly talking about species of sponges, seaweeds and polychraetes. Say what you will about the enthusiasm of marine biologists, it hardly translates well into a broad tourism campaign: “Port Phillip Bay: come for the sponges, stay for the polychraetes!”

Ultimately, for Weir and the DRI, the most challenging part of the ‘i sea i care Challenge’ is convincing boaties and beach-goers to see not just the dolphins (or the polychraetes), but the big picture. The big picture reveals that for dolphins and other marine life to thrive in Port Phillip Bay, all stakeholders need to be better informed about the effects their activities can have. And that’s

what Weir, the DRI and Club Marine, through its support, are working towards.

DRI TODAY AND TOMORROW

Today, the Dolphin Research Institute employs an education director, administrative staff, a group of seasonal educators and two part-time research officers as well as two PhD students from Monash University.

The institute continues to be a solutions-driven conservation organisation. It conducts crucial research of the bay and its educational programs are active in schools and community groups throughout Victoria.

Weir continues in his mission to protect the dolphins by building bridges to the wider community. “It’s about recognising that the vast majority of people want a healthy marine and coastal environment,” he says. “We need to show each other respect and work on that, rather than focusing on differences and hiding in our little groups.”



DOLPHIN WATCH

Because the DRI needs as much information as it can get about the behaviour of the dolphins in the bay, it created the Community Dolphin Watch program in 1994. Since then, thousands of boaties and locals have provided the DRI with reports of their dolphin sightings.

Since the dolphins in Port Phillip Bay stand at the top of the food chain, they're sensitive to any changes in the marine environment. So, drastic changes in their behaviour could point to larger issues within the bay's ecosystem. By collecting information on dolphin behaviour from the public, the DRI can keep tabs on the environment and identify if anything is wrong.

Sometimes, people do more than just observe the dolphins. Like, for instance, a recent incident in which a fisherman came to the rescue of a juvenile dolphin trapped in some discarded fishing line. It turns out the fisherman saw a blob floating on the surface of the water. As he got closer, he realised that it was a dolphin calf, completely wrapped up in fishing line, being buoyed up by a mother dolphin. Because the calf couldn't swim, the mother was trying to keep it from drowning. Ordinarily, boaties must stay 100 metres from dolphins, but to save both the dolphins, he moved in. "It took the guy nearly half an hour to get close enough to help," Weir says, recalling the story. "He grabbed the little


critter and unravelled it, and the pair swam away. A happy story."

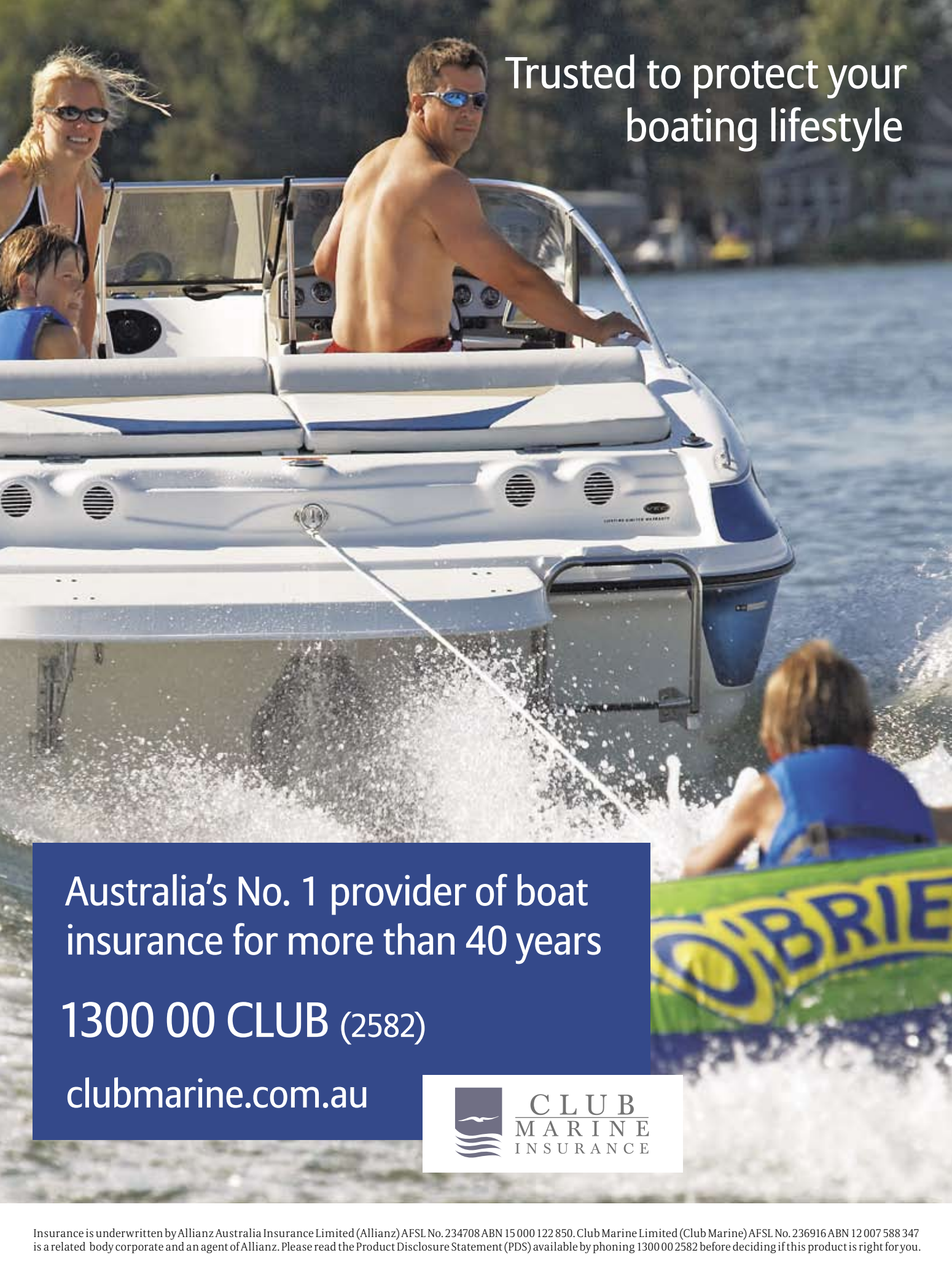
Sightings continue to be reported and with each one the DRI develops its understanding of Port Phillip Bay's unique dolphin population. Community involvement is at the core of the program's future success and the DRI is continuing to expand its sighting network. Along with individuals, they hope to have a network that will involve yacht clubs, fishing and dive charters, lifesaving clubs, the Coast Guard and others.

GUIDELINES

Club Marine is proud of its support for the DRI's work and we encourage our members to contribute to the understanding of these creatures by passing on their observations out on the water. In the meantime, the DRI asks that you observe the following important guidelines when encountering dolphins:

- If you are on a boat, remember that you must stay 100m away from whales and dolphins
- If you are swimming when you encounter a whale or dolphin, you must try to stay at least 30m away
- If you find a stranded whale or dolphin, notify the authorities as soon as possible. Don't try to return the animal to the sea

To report a sighting, go to www.dolphinresearch.org.au and click the "report my sighting" link. 



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