

35
YEARS

DOLPHIN
RESEARCH
INSTITUTE

SNAPSHOT
SUMMER 2025



i sea
i care

RESEARCH - EDUCATION - LEADERSHIP
SINCE 1991

www.dolphinresearch.org.au | 03 5979 7100

Welcome

Thanks to your incredible support, the Institute is poised to celebrate **our 35th anniversary in March 2026**.

Longevity is a significant theme throughout this Snapshot, being a critical factor in our key programs **achieving impact and building trust**.

In a world where trust is more vital than ever, particularly amidst the changing noise of 'fake news' and 'influencers', discerning what we should believe has become increasingly complex.

An example of this are the claims, that are unsupported by science, of windfarms killing whales, fuelling community protests against windfarms along the NSW and Victorian coasts.

Today, truth can be secondary to the political and funding aspirations of campaign-driven groups.

Our unwavering commitment is to provide you with trustworthy knowledge, from our own research and through our assessment of external sources. If we make a mistake, we will inform you, and if we face uncertainty, we will express it.

Your trust in our organisation is paramount; many of you have supported us for 34 years, and some have demonstrated the deepest faith in us by creating a bequest in their Will.

Working together, we provide a trusted voice for Victoria's dolphins and whales.

Kindest regards,

Jeff Weir OAM, Executive Director

PS. thank you to the many businesses and bidders who supported our online Christmas auction.

Discover Port Phillip EBooks

Three of our series of Ebooks are available on our website, with two in the pipeline.

<https://www.dolphinresearch.org.au/discoverportphillip/>



Update on '*i sea, i care*' Funding

Our Winter Snapshot had the confronting news that council cutbacks had put our '*i sea, i care*' program for schools in the Mornington Peninsula and Kingston Council areas in jeopardy for the year ahead.

So far thanks to your support and some budget stretching, no schools have been let down. Next year we will need to increase some of the costs to schools and are working closely with schools so that no child is disadvantaged.

We remain committed to supporting all our schools.

We are also inviting businesses to express their interest to become a major sponsor of the program.

Our model for change works through four impact areas with our programs working in synergy to achieve impact goals: The four impact areas are highlighted on the following pages and are: 1/ Dolphins and Whales, 2/ the Environment, 3/ the Community and 4/ a Strong Organisation. The following program areas (and more) are delivered by a dedicated team of volunteers and approximately five FTE staff.

**PORT PHILLIP
COMMON DOLPHIN
PROJECT**

**DOLPHIN
RESEARCH
INSTITUTE**

**Pod
Watch**
REPORT DOLPHIN AND WHALE SIGHTINGS

**Dolphin and Whale
DISTANCING**

**School
EDUCATION**

**Community
EDUCATION**

**Two Bays
Whale Project**
DOLPHIN RESEARCH INSTITUTE



**DOLPHIN
RESEARCH
INSTITUTE**

**Western Port
POD SURVEYOR**

**i sea i care
AMBASSADOR**

**TwoBays
Tracker**

**Port Phillip
POD SURVEYOR**

Cover image: Humpback whale in Bass Strait off the Wonthaggi windfarm. All images of dolphins and whales are taken under scientific research permit.

Our Third Williamson Research Fellow

Sarah Carrington joined us in October as our third Williamson Research Fellow after being selected from many high-calibre applicants from all over Australia and other countries.

She has just completed her Master's in Biosciences at The University of Melbourne, spending the last two years researching the impact of pharmaceutical pollution on marine life in Port Phillip.

Sarah presented her research at the 2025 Australian Marine Sciences Association Conference and is pictured (far right) with our current Williamson Research Fellow, Ella Hutchinson, who presented our work on the Whales in Bass Strait. Ella now takes on a mentor role with Sarah.

Sarah's passion outside of science is competitive dance at a national level.

We look forward to Sarah working as part of our team, and thank the Williamson Foundation for their support.



Victorian Renewable Energy Terminal

When the Victorian Renewable Energy Terminal (VRET) development was proposed in Hastings, many questions arose about the risks to Western Port's internationally significant environment.

The Port of Hastings Authority's proposal is to create the terminal between the existing wharfs of Esso and Bluescope Steel. An artist's impression of the VRET site (above) shows the substantial area left of the existing Esso wharf (circled), where imported components for the offshore windfarms will be assembled and loaded onto jack-up barges for installation in Bass Strait. The photo on the right gives a perspective looking towards Esso's wharf from the existing beach, which will be substantially reclaimed for the project.

Environmental approval requires the proponent to demonstrate that environmental risks are understood and can be managed to prevent **significant long-term impacts**.

A project likely to cause significant long-term impacts, should

not be approved, even as in this case, it will support our transition to renewable energy.

We are actively involved here because we are committed to protecting Western Port's values, the resident marine mammals, and the Bay's broad ecology. The Institute is a member of the project's Community Advisory Group, and have provided dolphin and whale data and made relevant submissions to the environment assessment process.

The Port of Hastings Authority anticipates an outcome of the environmental approval by 2027 and, if successful, the project to be operational by 2030.

The Institute has considered other large projects in the past. We always work to influence the process constructively, and wait until the results of the environmental studies are complete so that our final position is well-informed and based on solid evidence.

Our submissions and links to the project are maintained on the Institute's website.



10
YEARS

Spring brings on the southerly migration of over 30,000 humpback whales travelling down Australia's east coast on their way to a Summer in food-rich Antarctic waters. Some spend time off our coast – possibly resting with their new calves – or taking the scenic route past Wilsons Promontory. Only a few humpback whales keep travelling west, so sightings of whales around central Victoria are much less than on the northerly migration.

The wonderful image of a mother with her calf (above) was taken by Andrew Finnimore, one of our champion citizen scientists, from a gas platform in the Eastern Bass Strait where he works.

For newborn calves, it is their first trip with mum along the Australian coast. The calf in the image would be only a couple of months old, about six metres long, and over two tonnes. It would suckle over 200 litres of rich milk and put on over 40 kg every day! Some new research shows that during suckling, the mothers pump the milk into the calf's curled-up tongue, but only for short bursts of about 30 seconds at a time.

Our citizen scientists this year reported humpback whales in the Yarra River further than the Westgate Bridge.

Thanks to reports from other citizen scientists, we confirmed the same whales off Mornington on their journey back to Bass Strait.

Rare sightings of southern right whales were reported in Port Phillip in mid-October, with sightings as far north as Frankston over a period of nine days.

Fewer than 300 southern right whales are believed to be in the population that visits Southeast Australia each winter. Their numbers have not recovered since the end of commercial whaling, so they remain listed as critically endangered.

Our team is currently working through data from the 2025 whale season, including adding new flukes to the Victorian Humpback Whale Fluke Identification and Killer Whales Australia Catalogues.

Once the 2025 data is ready, we will update the white paper we published earlier in 2025 on humpback whale feeding and calving records in Bass Strait. This updated report is needed to influence decision-making about the renewable energy projects planned for our region.

We take a unique approach to other organisations, ensuring data from our own research and citizen science are made available as soon as possible to inform decision-making - **when it is relevant and needed**.



A recent report in the *Frontiers of Marine Science* titled “Til death do us part? The critical value of long-term marine mammal studies”, reinforces the difficulties in maintaining unbroken studies that must span decades and multiple generations of the species.

Sound familiar?

Thanks to your support, our Port Phillip Common Dolphin Project now spans 20 years, and we have the fourth generation being born! (This is on top of the 14 years study of bottlenose dolphins prior to 2005.)

In 2005, we were surprised to discover about five common dolphins near Mornington, and two decades later, we have 174 in the Port Phillip Catalogue. We refer to these animals as ‘using the Bay’ because there is a lot of movement between Bass Strait and the Bay. We are still working to understand the mix of animals that spend most of their time in the bay and those that are transient visitors.

During the cooler months, huge bait balls of fish build up in eastern Port Phillip, and both common and bottlenose dolphins, sea birds, seals, and little penguins all feast.

This is when the transients come into the bay, presumably to feed and mate, and dolphin numbers peak.

During a survey in late Winter, our team encountered between 80 and 100 common dolphins near Mornington, capturing nearly 3,000 images. From this one survey, 64 unique individuals were identified from the images, including eight new animals we had never seen before — the highest number of individuals we have detected on a single day. And remember, on top of this, are the dolphins we couldn’t ID on the day because, with so many, some missed being photographed, or they lacked the unique markings we use, like a ‘fin print’, for identification.

Long-term studies like the Port Phillip Common Dolphin Project, which track the success of multiple generations, provide a crucial window into the health of the ecosystem they rely on.

Our dolphins are like sentinels and ambassadors for their environment that complement their two-legged *‘i sea, i care’* Ambassador cousins on land.

Without your support of our crucial long-term programs, environmental managers would not have access to the trusted knowledge we share. There is nobody else to do what we do.

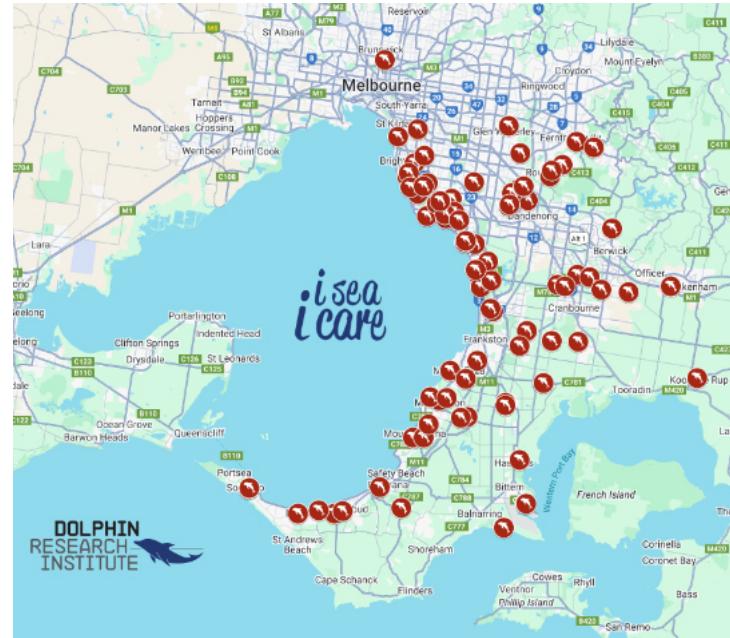
25
YEARS

'i sea, i care' is now part of the culture in school communities around our bays (red on map), empowering young leaders to inspire their peers to care for our coasts.

In 2026 our program will mark 10,000 Ambassadors who have peer-educated nearly two-million people in their school communities!

For some Ambassadors it is life-changing. Below are two stories showing the power of **'i sea, i care'**.

Our last Snapshot shared that funding cutbacks were putting **'i sea, i care'** at risk. This is still the case, making your support crucial to ensure that youngsters like Tess and Eli are not let down.



How **'i sea, i care'** Changed Me

By Tess McToldridge

Ever since I became an **'i sea, i care'** Ambassador with the Dolphin Research Institute in primary school, I have had a passion for pursuing a career in marine science.

I joined out of a simple interest in the ocean and marine wildlife, not realising the impact it would have on my life. As someone who struggled in primary school to make friends, being an Ambassador for DRI made me feel part of something important, and the excursions were one of the highlights of my primary school experience.

I will always remember my first excursion, where I got to swim with seals and saw a weedy sea dragon.

This experience made me realise the world was so much bigger and undiscovered than I thought. Now, when volunteering for DRI after graduating high school, I love teaching kids about the ocean and seeing their faces light up at this realisation too.



Above: Tess the Ambassador (left) & Tess the Student Marine Scientist (right)

I hope that after finishing my bachelor's in marine science, I will be able to get a job in marine education and tourism, so I can have an impact on a kid just like me.

Letter From a Proud Mum

By Lesley Grant

My beautiful son, Eli, recently held a stall at Bittern Community Market, selling some of his and his sister's books and toys, and some household goods that we no longer need.

He wanted to donate the money to a local wildlife organisation and he chose the Dolphin Research Institute.

Eli is very passionate about the ocean and its precious creatures and can often be found cleaning up the beaches.



He recently presented his speech in front of his school, hoping to gain the role of one of the Environmental Leaders in Year 6 next year. His school, Mornington Park PS, supports their Year 6 Environmental Leaders to participate in **'i sea, i care'**, he is very hopeful that he will be chosen.

(Eli with Jeff Weir after presenting the amazing \$240.30 he raised!)



A Year of Learning and Giving Back. Workshops in the second half of the year take Ambassadors into catchment and coastal environments to learn about wetlands (above), learn about stormwater pollution (below left), collect and analyse rubbish washed off our streets (below right), learn from indigenous leaders how their ancestors lived on the coast (bottom left and centre) and work with rangers to weed and revegetate coastal habitats (below right). They then share their new knowledge with their school communities.



FUTURE GENERATIONS APPEAL



June with newborn calf May 2025

Tess's uplifting story shared earlier in the Snapshot about how '*i sea, i care*' changed her life is a testament to the power of our program.

She remains one of our essential volunteers while completing her degree in Marine Science.

In her own words, "I hope that after finishing my bachelor's in marine science, I will be able to get a job in marine education and tourism so that I can have an impact on a kid just like me." She's made a head start as a volunteer (right)!

'i sea, i care' is a nursery ground for young leaders who inspire others, especially the younger members of their school communities who also want to be Ambassadors.

In 2026, *'i sea, i care'* will celebrate 25 years and 10,000 Ambassadors, many just like Tess.



Tess(right) volunteering with 'kids just like her'

However, it is disheartening to share that our beloved *'i sea, i care'* program is at risk following council cutbacks.

With the **program now in jeopardy**, your support is even more urgent.

Through your donation, you have the power to give certainty to *'i sea, i care'* schools, and also to our other programs that are at risk of being scaled back.

Together, we will foster a hopeful future for our whales and dolphins (like June with her new calf above), as well as nurture future generations of young environmental leaders and scientists.

On behalf of everyone at the Dolphin Research Institute, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to you, our cherished donors, for your support and trust in our cause.

Jeff Weir OAM, Executive Director.



The QR code takes you directly to our appeal page

Thank You To Our Valued Supporters



ConocoPhillips
JIW Foundation
Amplitude Energy

