

Monkey Mia revisited

An ancient friendship at high tide

Bert Schwarzschild and friend

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In a remote western Australian bay dolphins visit with humans in a ritual that may go back centuries.

Bert Schwarzschild



dozen men, women and children stand in knee-deep water, scanning the choppy waves and distant horizon. Most have driven hours out of their way to camp at this Western Australian desert beach welcoming the unusual ambassadors from the ocean.

"Look, they're coming!" a child shouts. The excitement intensifies. A few sharp-eyed individuals make out the shape and undulating movement of two protruding dorsal fins barely discernible among the distant whitecaps. The fins appear and disappear in the water, steadily increasing in size. It becomes obvious to all that the approaching aquatic visitors are swimming directly toward them. Two shiny, sleek, five-foot-long marine mammals slowly glide into their midst, without fear or hesitation, and greet them.

During my two weeks at the beachfront campsite, I was an eyewitness to this and other remarkable encounters between a community of wild dolphins and a human welcoming committee. This unique interspecies interaction is thoroughly described

by naturalist-author Elizabeth Gawain in her book, *The Gift of the Dolphin* and summarized in her *CREATION* article, "The Dolphins of Monkey Mia" (May/June '85). The Monkey Mia dolphins' physical and spiritual presence definitely affected—or transformed—the humans frolicking with them in the surf. I was no exception. I found myself more playful and in touch with the child within me than before. This state of playfulness and lightness has persisted.

While traveling around Australia, I kept wondering why the world's only known long-term dolphin-people encounter was occurring at the Monkey Mia beach and nowhere else. Why had these dolphins initiated and maintained this friendly association with humans?

I also wondered if the Australian coastal aborigines, who had lived in this vast land in near-perfect harmony with nature for 50,000 years, had any ongoing relationship with the dolphins which might help explain the friendship at Monkey Mia. During my Australian visit, I became painfully aware of the plight of the country's Native Australians, whose rich culture was shattered

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by the arriving white settlers in the nineteenth century. I speculated that the coastal dolphins and coastal aborigines might have developed some social relationships in the Monkey Mia area in past generations, which could help explain the encounters I had witnessed.

After questioning scores of experts, local aborigines and anyone who would listen, I drew a blank. I continued my search for an aborigine-dolphin connection. Detailed publications on the aborigines verified their skills in hunting a variety of animals, including such sea mammals as dugongs, but contained no references to aborigines hunting or befriending dolphins. While visiting the prestigious Western Australian Museum in Perth, whose staff oversees all historic and cultural aboriginal sites of the region, the museum's human studies department director invited me to search through the hundreds of photographic "mug shots" of aboriginal stone engravings maintained by the museum.

As I scanned each photo with a magnifying glass, I found many engravings of fish and whales, but no dolphins. After an hour's perusal, I suddenly found it: a single stone engraving of a pod (family) of dolphins. Now I had proof that dolphins were at least important enough to be carved in stone by earlier aborigines.

Later I visited Canberra, the nation's capital, to pursue another clue in this continuing mystery at the government's Institute of Aboriginal Research. I phoned the institute. "I'll look for anything relevant in the stacks while you hurry over," the assistant librarian, Mr. Mulvaney, offered. "But hurry, we close in a half hour!" This was my very last chance to find the missing link before departing Australia for home.

When I arrived, the librarian placed three documents in front of me relating to aborigines and dolphins, the only ones he could find on such short notice. The first document was totally irrelevant. The second was a compilation of three aboriginal myths involving dolphins—interesting, but no proof of an actual human-dolphin relationship.

Then I picked up and glanced at the third and final document, a typed summary of some old chronicles. The document was titled, "The Pale Invader and the Dark Avenger—The Story of the Aboriginal Tribes in Queensland," and bore the author's name: Clem Lack, BA Dip. Jour. (Fellow of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland). I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the headline: *Aboriginal Affinity with Porpoises*. What followed was music to my ears: "The Queensland and New South Wales aborigines had a strange affinity or understanding

with the porpoises (dolphins); they regarded these mammals as their friends, and used them to shepherd shoals of mullet and tailer (two common indigenous fish) toward the beach where they would be netted and speared.

"The aborigines would never, on any account, kill a porpoise [the author later explained that by *porpoise* was meant *bottlenose dolphin*]. They even claim to own individual porpoises, and nothing would offend them more than an attempt to injure one of them."

Then followed the eyewitness accounts of two scientific observers (T.E. Huxley and J.G. MacGillivray) aboard the British ship HMS Rattlesnake, who on October 18, 1847, "... saw natives and porpoises co-operating in catching shoals" (schools of mullet). The document further described a similar incident observed in 1836 by a Quaker missionary (J. Beckhouse): "One or several natives would wade into the sea, waist deep, and strike the water three times with spears. In response, the porpoises would encircle the shoal of mullet and drive them toward shore. The aborigines would run in with their net and scoop up the fish in the hundreds."

In another section of this remarkable document, titled "Porpoises Yarded Like Kelpies," the author described the observations of yet another eyewitness (Tom Petric), who "... used to join parties of aborigines at Moreton Island (near Brisbane) where they went fishing." Petric relates how they caught tailer fish with the help of the porpoises: "At a signal from the aborigines beating the water with their spears and driving the spear points into the sand, the porpoises would drive the fish toward the shore like kelpies [sheep dogs] driving a flock of sheep. When the fish were in the shore surf, the aboriginals would run out and spear them in the hundreds, or alternately catch them in their heart-shaped nets. The porpoise would swim leisurely among the fish, showing no fear of the aborigines. Natives would hold out fish on the end of a spear to a porpoise who would leap out of the water and take it in its jaws, armed with many pairs of peg-like teeth. These porpoises were the large bottlenose dolphins (*tursiops catalania*) which are noted for being sociable and playful creatures."

The above and additional documented eyewitness accounts prove that an ongoing cooperative relationship between aborigines and dolphins existed 150 years ago. We can only speculate by how many centuries the interspecies friendship may have preceded the arrival of modern foreign chroniclers and their eyewitness accounts. Also

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Permanent park needed

The dolphin-human phenomenon at Monkey Mia, which may have taken hundreds of years to evolve, is now threatened by an increasing number of tourists at the site. There is no permanent trained staff to supervise and control the situation. While some volunteers have tried to fill the gap, only permanent professional staff will be able to deal with the increasing pressure on the Monkey Mia phenomenon.

One solution is permanent national park status for the Shark Bay Peninsula which encompasses Monkey Mia. In 1975, a committee of prominent scientists completed a landmark report recommending National Park and Aquatic Reserve status for most of the Shark Bay region's land and adjacent waters, including Monkey Mia. These recommendations have been endorsed by most of the relevant government officials and agencies of Western Australia.

Ten years later Shark Bay National Park and Aquatic Reserve are still an elusive dream, but there is increasing pressure from the conservation community and general public to create such a park soon. In addition to protecting the human-dolphin interaction, a Shark Bay park would protect a host of threatened or endangered species, such as one of the world's largest dugong population; a major concentration of green turtles; the last stronghold of stromatolites, an early megascopic life form widespread some 600 million years ago; and countless other life forms.

Readers can help sustain the dolphin-human friendship at Monkey Mia by expressing their support for establishment of Shark Bay National Park and Aquatic Reserve to: Australian National Park Authority, Canberra, Australia. ○

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revealed in this amazing document, is the existence of an aboriginal belief held at that time, that the dolphins were "... inhabited by the souls of departed aboriginals, another instance of the widespread belief by the Australian aborigines of metempsychosis: the transmigration of souls."

While these startling observations were made along a part of the Australian coast (near Brisbane) more than 2,000 miles from the remote Monkey Mia beach where the present-day human-dolphin interactions are taking place, it can be surmised from known traditions, that the earlier coastal aborigines who once frequented Shark Bay and Monkey Mia, had also developed a cooperative relationship with the local dolphins.

The rediscovered spiritual and cooperative bond between the aborigines and the dolphins of 150 years ago suggests the startling possibility that the present-day Monkey Mia dolphins' trust of, and propensity for, their human visitors were transmitted, in part, from previous dolphin generations! While further work needs to be done to test this hypothesis, the Canberra revelations are a new beginning in our effort to learn more about two remarkable cultures: that of the Australian aborigines and that of the dolphins. ○

Bert Schwarzschild is an environmental advocate who launched the worldwide Assisi Bird Campaign (CREATION March / April '85) to stop the hunting of song birds in Assisi, Italy. He has also worked to protect the whales and their ocean habitat.

