

BLUE LAGUNA



A PADDLEBOARDER'S PERSPECTIVE BY **RICH GERMAN**

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The Dolphins and Whales of Laguna Beach

A PADDLEBOARDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Rich German

Blue Laguna

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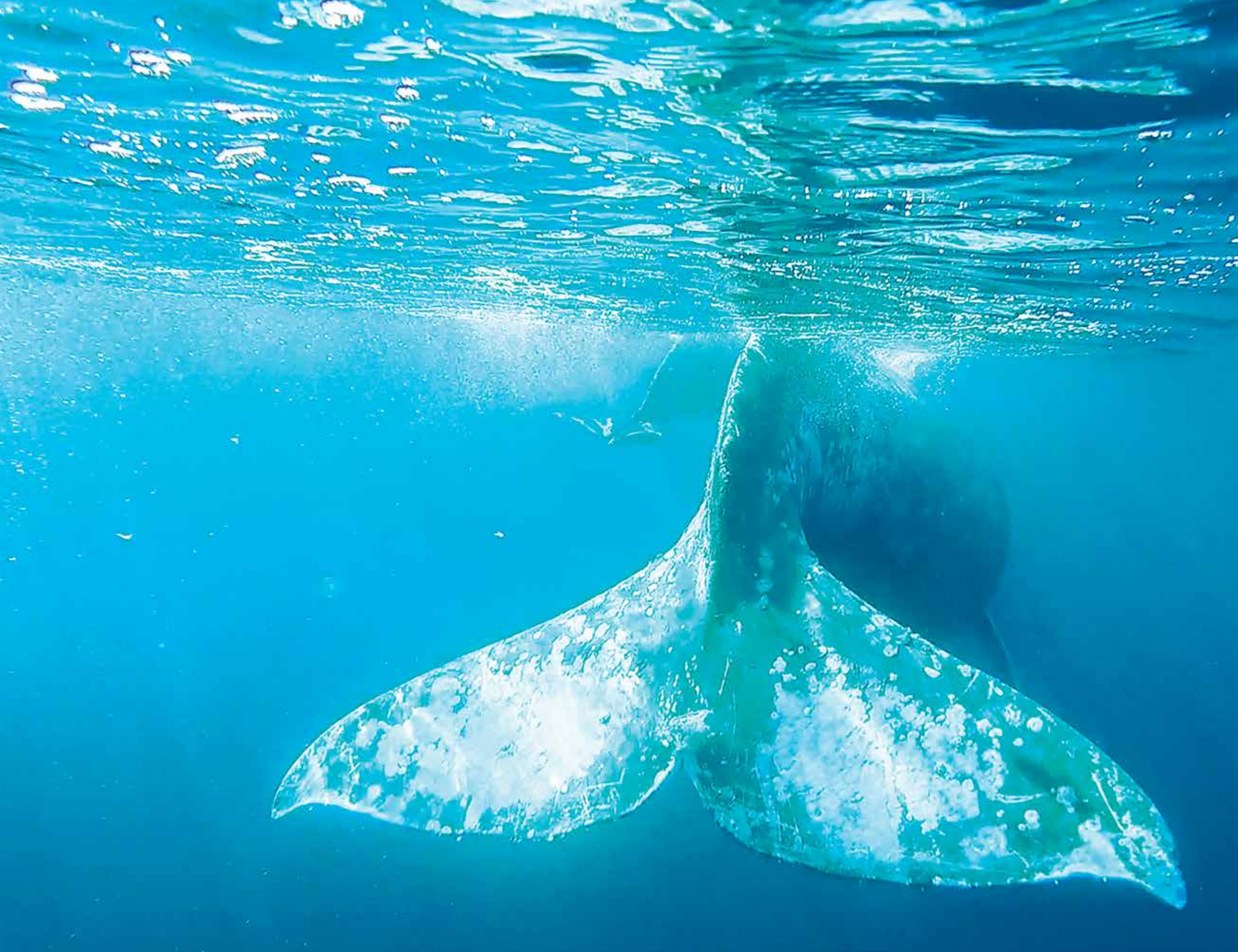
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when the ocean comes to you as a lover,
marry at once for God's sake.
don't postpone it.
existence has no greater gift.

~ R u m i





no ocean, no us.

know ocean, know us.

~rg



SACRED WATERS

The dry desert heat of Laguna Beach, California—one of the most beautiful little beach towns in the world—merges with the cool blue Pacific Ocean to create an ideal climate. When in doubt, it's safe to guess the area is a pleasant 70 to 72 degrees Fahrenheit with sunny skies.

To get here, you either travel through the Laguna Canyon, which leads you into a quaint village famous for its art galleries and shops, or you cruise on the iconic Pacific Coast Highway, flanked by scenic hills to the east and the majestic Pacific Ocean to the west.

Laguna is a beach lover's dream. If you walk just a short distance away from the hustle and bustle of the tourists at Main Beach, you can hike around large rocks with waves crashing against picturesque coves. The beauty of Laguna Beach is rivaled only, perhaps, by the scenic shores of Hawaii.

In 2010, I moved into a home that sits 131 steps from one of Laguna's coves on the north side of town. Sharing the name of the beach where I live might get me killed, mainly

because locals who have spent decades there don't want to draw attention to the sacred spot of sand we call home—so I won't give away the exact location.

Just as I moved into my new place, stand up paddleboarding (SUP) was quickly becoming the fastest-growing water sport in the world. Almost overnight, I would look out from the coast and see people standing on the ocean, like they were walking on water.

At that point in my life, I definitely loved the ocean, but I didn't consider myself an ocean man. Like most people, I enjoyed the vast expanse of water from the safety of the beach. At first, I felt hesitant to try paddling. Although I was athletic and grew up playing sports non-stop, I seemed to lose all coordination whenever I tried sports that took me off my feet, like skiing and snowboarding. I assumed paddleboarding would be the same for me.

But one day, shortly after moving in, my neighbor Bryan talked me into giving paddleboarding a shot. He wanted to try it out himself. Reluctantly, I agreed, thinking I'd probably

spend more time in the water than on the board. Fortunately, I was wrong. I never fell in. In fact, I was instantly comfortable on a paddleboard. Soon after that, I started paddling with my friend Noelle, a true ambassador of the sport. She looked a lot better in her bikini than Bryan did in his board shorts. I was hooked.

Every day I would wake up and paddle out on the ocean. I was struck by how different the view of Laguna Beach was from my board in the middle of the ocean as compared to the view on land. To stand on the emerald blue ocean surrounded by miles of water in every direction transformed me in multiple ways. Paddling became my main source of exercise. I looked forward to waking up early and paddling out as the sun rose over the mountains, lighting up this magical town beside the immense Pacific Ocean that I now called home.

The ocean quickly became my church, my sanctuary, my meditation—an extension of me. I go there now to connect with nature, with my spirit... with my Self.

Fellow ocean lover and photographer Giancarlo Thomae captured this image of me with a dolphin flying towards the nose of my board.

AND THEN THE DOLPHINS SHOWED UP

When I first started paddling, I had no idea the waters off Laguna Beach were filled with as many different species of dolphins and whales as perhaps any place on the entire planet.

Surrounded by natural beauty in every direction, I began seeing wild dolphins on a regular basis. The more I paddled, the more I'd see them. Encountering these graceful mammals became a spiritual experience for me. Standing on my board and gliding over the ocean, I felt deeply connected to my environment and to these gorgeous creatures of the sea.

I often encountered small pods of friendly bottlenose dolphins hugging the coastline. A little farther out during colder months, playful Pacific white-sided dolphins spent their winters in Laguna Beach. When I paddled greater distances out to sea, massive pods of common dolphins would race by me, jumping and flying out of the ocean like great acrobats.

Over time, I learned their patterns, which improved my luck of encountering them often. I felt extremely happy in the presence of dolphins and began cultivating a deeper connection with these wild, highly intelligent, conscious animals. They even began to recognize me and perceive that I was not a threat. Often, they welcomed me into their pod and we would cruise together for miles. While cruising with the pod, my mind was freed of the usual thoughts

that plague human beings, and I felt myself enter a state of timeless bliss.

These moments were very intimate and personal, but I still wanted to try capturing them via photo and video—partly to satisfy my own creative needs and partly to share my unique encounters with other ocean lovers or with people who might not be as fortunate to experience the ocean in the unique ways that I have been.

To begin, I bought a cheap waterproof camera and started posting photographs of my ocean adventures on Facebook. A couple of years later, I bought a GoPro and started filming videos that I also posted online. The images I captured of my encounters with dolphins seemed to engage and inspire people from around the world. People's enthusiastic responses to my images and videos inspired me to keep shooting and sharing.

For a long time, I focused only on the dolphins. Then, as I was paddling one summer day, I looked far out toward the horizon and saw a huge spout. All alone, I felt a little hesitant to investigate, assuming a huge creature was the source of this huge spout. But then I saw another spout three stories high—and another. My curiosity got the best of me.

I started paddling far from the shore. After paddling two miles out, I found myself flanked by two 100-foot-long Blue

Whales, the largest animals ever to have lived on the planet. Part of me (for sure) was scared. After all, I was standing alone on my 14-foot-long paddleboard in the presence of two immense whales. But I quickly realized these giants of the sea were docile and harmless. In fact, they seemed as curious about me as I was about them.

I felt blown away by the thought that just two short miles from the busyness of Orange County and its millions of residents, I was standing on the water in the presence of these mystical dinosaurs. That contrast was incredible and their majestic beauty was like nothing I had ever experienced.

Since that first meeting with these behemoths of the sea, I've had dozens of encounters with many different species of whales: Blue Whales, Humpbacks, Grays, Minkes, Fins, and even Orcas (also known as "killer whales"). In fact, in January 2015, my video of a pod of Orca whales swimming right underneath my board went viral across the globe. I share more about the video and its impact later in this book.

I have a hard time describing the feeling I get when I'm in the presence of wild dolphins and whales. But even after hundreds of interactions with them over many years, whenever a bottlenose dolphin approaches me, makes eye contact, and then swims directly under the nose of my board, I still feel the elation of a child.

THE OCEAN WAS DYING

For a long time, people have encouraged me to create this photo book. Honestly, I've always been hesitant. The ocean is my church, so I've resisted merging anything business-related to something very intimate and spiritual to me.

But I've finally succumbed for a couple of reasons. First, people seem to experience great joy seeing the photos I've taken. Most people, even many southern California locals, are not aware of the incredible diversity of wildlife right off the coast. I want to show people this whole other world. The ocean is also a great healer. Perhaps this book will inspire people to get on or in the ocean.

My second goal is to raise as much awareness as possible for the ocean and the sacred life living in it.

Why? Because the ocean—our ocean—is in trouble.

Beyond the fact that the ocean brings us what we want—beauty, inspiration, recreation, peace and serenity—it also brings us what we *need to live*.

Did you know that the ocean generates over half the oxygen we breathe? All humans and all mammals need air to breathe and water to drink. The health of humankind is in direct proportion to the health of the ocean, so it's in our vital interest to protect it. In other words, the fate of humankind—our safety, our economy, our survival—requires a healthy ocean.

Specifically, I want people to understand how the people of Laguna Beach took a stand to protect their backyard. People need to know what's possible when we simply leave the ocean alone to restore itself, which is exactly what Laguna Beach did to restore an area of its coast that had become lifeless from overfishing.

On January 1st, 2012, it became illegal to fish along a six-mile stretch of the Laguna Beach coast. This particular area was deemed a “**no-take zone**.” Prior to that, if you were to talk to anyone who spent a lot of time in the water, they would tell you that the waters in that area were pretty much dead—all but empty of fish.

Just six months after the ban, however, I remember paddling out onto the water and looking straight down. I saw fish. Lots of fish. Everywhere!

“There's no way this is a result of the fishing ban,” I thought to myself. “Could the ocean restore itself so quickly if we just left it alone?”

I learned the answer to my question was, “Yes, it could.” And it did.

All of a sudden tiny fish, and little fish, and big fish were swimming around again. And, of course, lots of dolphins and whales also inhabited the area.

A SAFE HAVEN

A safe haven was created along this minute stretch of coastline called Laguna Beach. I like to call it one of the world's greatest aquariums.

A whole other world exists for us all to enjoy. Either from the cliffs above, on a board, swimming, snorkeling, or scuba diving, Laguna Beach is proof of how powerful the ocean is and what's possible if we just leave it alone.

I believe my encounters with these wild animals is also proof that all marine animals should live free in the ocean. I want people to love the ocean and these marine animals so much that they begin, naturally, to do whatever needs to be done to protect the ocean and its wildlife—just like we would protect our own children.

This book is a collection of my favorite images of different species of dolphins and whales that either live permanently in Laguna Beach or migrate through here each year. Some of the photos were taken within 100 yards from shore—some from as far out as five miles.

Except where noted, I took all these photos from a stand up paddle board—most of them on my custom 14-foot Laird SUP emblazoned with images of Jimi Hendrix and Bob Marley. Apparently, the dolphins have good taste in music.

The photos were taken with an inexpensive waterproof camera—no fancy SLR with zoom lens. I wear a GoPro on my head to shoot video and keep the handheld in my pocket.

As Rumi says, “The ocean has come to me as a lover.” It's a gift I do not take lightly. It's hard to find the words to express my love for the ocean and the marine life living in it. I hope the images in this book will say what words cannot. My connection to the dolphins and whales is a huge gift and my gift back to them is to spread as much love and awareness as possible for them.

I envision an ocean in which all animals are free to live as nature intended. The vision is to help restore, protect, and sustain the ocean, the marine life living in it, and all of humankind, now and for countless generations to follow.

I hope you enjoy the images.



When you see this symbol throughout the book, scan it on your smartphone to see video footage.

Map illustration by Emanuela Dararlat

Irvine
Cove

LAGUNA BEACH



Main
Beach

bottlenose
dolphins

pacific white-sided
dolphins

common
dolphins

gray
whales

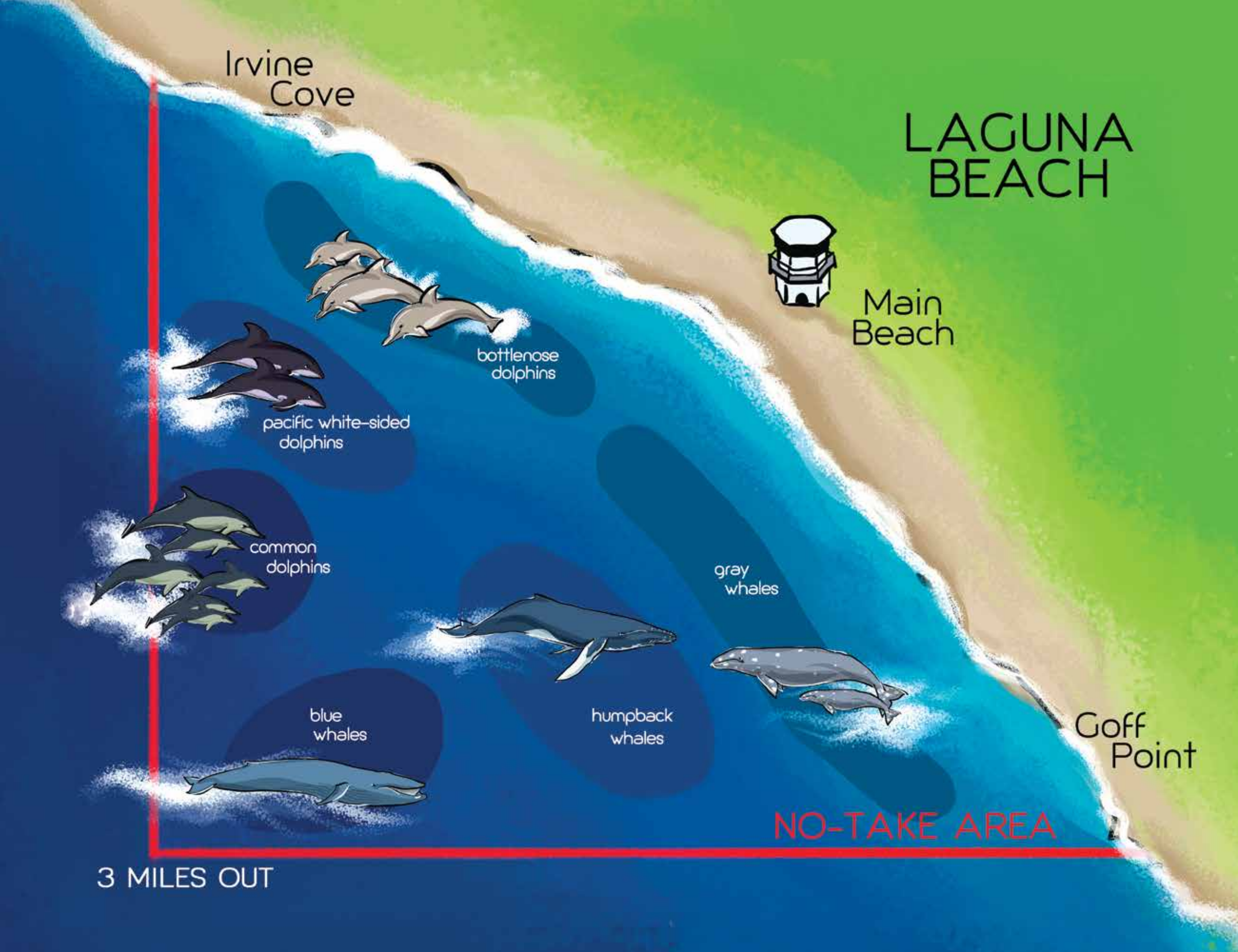
blue
whales

humpback
whales

Goff
Point

NO-TAKE AREA

3 MILES OUT





BOTTLENOSE
DOLPHINS



Bottlenose dolphins are perhaps the most loved marine animal in the ocean. Many call Laguna Beach home. Over the years, I have had hundreds of bottlenose dolphin encounters. Typically, they travel in pods of two to four—sometimes as many as 15 or more.

Tending to travel just up and down the coast, these dolphins like to stay very close to shore. If you're standing on a cliff or on the beach in town, you'll have a good chance of seeing a happy pod cruise by.

The bottlenose swim at about the same speed that I paddle. Often, they will welcome me into their pod, traveling miles together with me. Even after countless paddles with them, I am ALWAYS very happy in their presence. The feeling I experience when a wild, smiling dolphin swims right up to me and makes eye contact is indescribable.

They love to come right under the nose of my board. And the babies are the cutest, most playful things in the world! Even though I've had incredible encounters with many

different species of marine animals, the bottlenose hold a special place in my heart. Most of my cetacean interactions are with them, and the fact that I can hop on my board, paddle out a couple hundred yards, and be with them pretty much whenever I want never gets old.



FACTS ABOUT BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS

- They are called “bottlenose” because of their short, stubby beak.
- They are social creatures that travel in pods, playing and hunting together for food.
- Full-grown, they can grow up to 12 feet long and weigh up to 1,100 pounds.
- The curved dorsal fin on their back, powerful flukes on their tail, and their pointed flipper allow them to swim up to 18 miles per hour, diving down as deep as 800 feet.
- Like whales, dolphins are conscious breathers who must come to the surface for air. They can hold their breath for several minutes, but they typically surface within one or two minutes.
- These beautiful animals are amazing communicators, using squeaks, whistles and body language to send messages to each other. They also use a process called echolocation—high-pitched clicks—to navigate and find food, which, for them, is mostly fish.

Laguna Beach resident and photographer Marshall Aren took these fun photos of me at 'work.'









the greatest lesson I have learned from the dolphins
is how to be fully present and in the moment.
when I am with them all thoughts disappear
and nothing else exists.

~ r g



*photo above: A very happy bottlenose dolphin at Main Beach.
photo right: My buddy Jeff enjoying a sunset dolphin paddle.*







*photo left: A lone dolphin cruising close to shore at Main Beach
photo above: Is there anything cuter than a baby dolphin?*



*Cruising through Crystal Cove State Park with Pacific Coast Highway in the background.
right: Mom protecting her baby.*







*photo left: Michelle Nicoloff took this shot of me with a dolphin riding on my bow at Heisler Park.
photo below: Can't get enough of the baby bottlenose!*







the dolphins and the whales . . .

these are my gurus.

they love in a way with which we are not familiar.

~ r g



Photo left: More sweet dolphins in Heisler Park

Photo above: My paddle buddy Cindy doing her favorite thing.





Here's a pod heading south in front of the Surf & Sand Resort.



photo right: This is a bottlenose on the south end of Main Beach in front of the classic Hotel Laguna, built in 1930.









*photo left: I am not sure who is happier in this shot . . . the dolphin or my friend Tiffany. All smiles.
photo below: Two bottlenose posing in front of the iconic tower by Victoria Beach.*







photo left: The dolphins like to come play right off shore at Main Beach in the mornings. Here's a solo dolphin in front of the famous lifeguard tower.

photo below: The bottlenose will sometimes swim upside like this when feeding on fish.





PACIFIC
WHITE-SIDED
DOLPHINS



Pacific white-sided dolphins are beautiful and playful creatures that come to Laguna in the colder months. Some of the most amazing experiences I've had on the ocean have been with the white-sided dolphins. While the bottlenose dolphins like to hug the coast, the white-sided dolphins are typically about one-third to one-half mile off shore. Sometimes these fast swimmers will blow right past me, so my encounter with them is a short

one. Other times, a large pod will come right underneath my board and swim slowly around me for long distances.

Their coloring ranges from light to dark gray with a white underside. Black rings cover their eyes. Their dorsal fin has a distinct hook on the end of it. These features add to their beauty, and their quirky behavior makes them incredibly charming.



Scan this on your smartphone to see video footage of "Pacific White-Sided Dolphins - Baby Steals the Show."



FACTS ABOUT PACIFIC WHITE-SIDED DOLPHINS

- Smaller than bottlenose dolphins, they are about 8 feet long and weigh about 300 pounds when full-grown.
- They are very fast swimmers and incredible acrobats. They love to leap out of the water and do flips.
- In other locations they travel in pods of hundreds, but in Laguna Beach, they typically travel in pods of no more than 30.
- Like other dolphins, the white-sided communicate by means of echolocation.
- They inhabit the temperate Northern Pacific Ocean, hence their name.













the limitations of the mind are revealed in nature.
only when we connect deeply with that which
breathes life into our soul can we experience the
boundlessness of our own consciousness.

~ r g



SEA LIONS



Perhaps my favorite spot in town is Crescent Bay Park in north Laguna. Perched on a cliff that overlooks Crescent Bay beach and Seal Rock, is a gorgeous, serene spot with stunning sunsets 365 days a year.

The park sits above Seal Rock, home to a large population of sea lions. Hardly a day goes by that I don't paddle over to see the cute, curious sea lions hopping on and off the rock. Beyond

being a beautiful location that all but guarantees wildlife viewing, bottlenose dolphins typically cruise past this spot.

Our sea lions are adorable and playful . . . and always a treat to watch.

Noel Besuzzi took this cool shot of me taking a photo of Seal Rock from her iPhone.



FACTS ABOUT SEA LIONS

- They can swim at burst speeds of up to 24 miles per hour.
- Their average life span is about 20 years.
- Pups weigh about 13-20 pounds and are 2.5 feet long when born.
- Full-grown females can weigh up to 400 pounds and grow up to 6.5 feet long.
- Males are larger, weighing up to 600 pounds and can grow up to 8 feet long.

Located in the Laguna Canyon, the **Pacific Marine Mammal Rescue Center** rescues, rehabilitates, and releases sea lions that beach themselves when feeling ill. Their trained staff recognizes when animals are suffering from infections, malnourishment, and other conditions that can harm the sea lions' chance for survival.

Witnessing the release of a sea lion back into the ocean is always a beautiful site. If you're visiting Laguna Beach, be sure to drop by the rescue center. More details at www.pacificmmc.org.





photo left: I love this shot. This is by far the most sea lions I have ever seen at Seal Rock.











nature is our greatest healer.
We need its beauty like
we need oxygen to breathe.

~ r g





BLUE WHALES



For about two years, I had been paddling close to shore almost every day and had experienced hundreds of wonderful encounters with dolphins. But one day in the summer of 2013, my marine animal experience reached an entirely new level. As I was paddling off the coast, I saw a couple of massive spouts far in the distance. The spouts shot up above the ocean over thirty feet, so I knew they could only come from whales—large ones. I didn't know exactly what I would find out there, but I felt compelled to investigate. Paddling exactly two miles straight out, I saw a line of buoys in the water and found myself in the presence of two massive blue whales.

The blue whale is the largest animal ever known to have lived on Earth. These gentle giants grow up to 100 feet long (roughly the length of two school buses). They are also the loudest animal on the planet. I can hear the sound of their breath from over half a mile away. In fact, I typically hear blue whales before I see them.

I will never forget that first day, two miles out in the middle of the ocean, standing on my little board all alone in the presence of these massive dinosaurs of the sea. While I was extremely alert—as I always am in the presence of whales—I immediately realized how calm and docile these two whales were. They were very conscious that I was nearby, but knew I was no threat to them.

That encounter with blue whales immediately hooked me. At sunrise the next morning, I hopped on my board and paddled out two miles straight back to the buoys. A man on a boat was working on one of the buoys, which turned out to be some type of fishing trap. He told me I was exactly two miles out and that the water there was 600 feet deep. Up to that point, the water was only about 250 feet deep, but a shelf there preceded a 600-foot drop to the ocean floor. The location is called 100 Fathom—a fathom being six feet.

Honestly, that depth of water kind of freaked me out. The thought that I was standing on my board on water 600

feet deep was a little intimidating. The man also told me that another half mile out, the ocean floor dropped to 1,500 feet.

He also explained the blue whales gravitated to that spot because huge amounts of tiny shrimp-like crustaceans called “krill” are there during the summer when the water is warmer. Unlike gray whales and humpbacks that have distinct migration patterns, the blue whales do not migrate. Instead, they go where the krill is. In fact, blue whales eat MILLIONS of krill every day.

For the rest of that summer (and every summer since), as long as the conditions are good and I have a couple hours to make the trek, I will paddle out looking for blue whales. Some days I won't see any. Other days I will see just one in the distance. On the best of days, blue whales will surround me by the dozens. Just knowing that these magical, mystical creatures are close by is enough for me to make the short pilgrimage out to sea, hoping to be with them.



Scan this on your smartphone to see video footage of “Paddle Boarders Close Encounter with the Largest Animal in the World.”



FACTS ABOUT BLUE WHALES

- Blue Whales grow up to 100 feet long, making them the largest animals ever to have lived on the planet. They are twice the size of the largest dinosaurs. Imagine the length of two school buses!
- They weigh up to 200 tons. Their tongues can weigh as much as an elephant.
- Their hearts are as big as an automobile.
- Blue whales live 80 to 90 years old.
- They look blue underwater, which explains their name, although they're more gray than blue in color.
- They typically travel alone or in pairs.
- Blue Whales can hear each other up to 1,000 miles away, meaning that every blue whale on the planet is in communication with each other.
- There used to be over 300,000 blue whales on the planet. Unfortunately because of aggressive hunting in the 20th century, only 8,000-10,000 are believed to exist. Today, it's illegal to hunt them, so they have made a minor recovery.





photo left: A massive blue whale coming right towards me.





photo left: The body is so huge it didn't all fit within the shot.





photo above: A close-up of a smiling blue whale.





Here's my buddy Joshua getting the ride of his life next to an 80-foot blue whale about 5 miles off shore.



GRAY WHALES

Local photographer and drone pilot Mark Girardeau captured this shot of a female gray whale rolling over on its side as I paddled next to her.



Gray whales make the longest migration of any mammal on Earth. In the fall, thousands of them, including pregnant mothers, head south from Alaska, making the 6,000 mile journey south to the quiet lagoons of Baja California in Mexico to give birth to their babies.

This is good news for us here in Laguna Beach because for about six straight months, we have beautiful gray whales passing through our waters. In December, we start seeing

them as they make their way south to Mexico. Then they return north with their newborns in tow making the long trek back to Alaska. The best time to see them is between March and May when the mothers bring their calves extremely close to shore. I used to think they came so close to the beach because the babies were just playful and curious, but the real reason they do this is to protect their babies from predators like orcas, who feed on baby gray whales.

During the late winter to spring, I can be found most days paddling close to shore in hopes of finding a pod of bottlenose dolphins or some gray whales. If I'm out long enough, I'm almost guaranteed to encounter a whale. On a lucky day, I can see gray whales engage in lots of playful activities, including spy hopping (when they pop their heads straight out of the water) and breaching (where they defy gravity and completely jump out of the water).



Scan this on your smartphone to see video footage of "Paddle Boarders with 4 Gray Whales - 1st ever Drone and POV Footage."

*My friend Ethan and I sharing an unforgettable moment with a mom and baby gray whale.
photo credit: Mark Girardeau*



FACTS ABOUT GRAY WHALES

- Gray whales grow to 40-50 feet long on average and weigh 30-40 tons. They are half the size of a blue whale but still the size of a school bus!
- They are typically covered with barnacles—parasites and other organisms— that make their snouts and backs look like crusty ocean rock.
- They filter their food with their baleen, a comb-like strainer of plates in their upper jaw.
- The annual gray whale migration is a stunning 12,000-mile round trip journey from Alaska to Mexico and back.
- Once the target of extensive hunting, these whales were in serious danger of extinction. Today, international law protects them, and their numbers are growing. In 1994, the gray whale was removed from the United States endangered species list.





Here is a gray whale very close to shore near Victoria Beach.



Two moms and two baby gray whales playing in Emerald Bay.





ORCAS



On January 6, 2015, I heard that a pod of orcas was spotted in Long Beach California heading south, about thirty miles north of Laguna. Transient killer whales travel great distances each day, but I wondered if they might come visit Laguna.

When I paddled out the next afternoon, I noticed a group of boats about two miles off shore just sitting there, which led me to believe they were watching something. Perhaps it was the pod of orcas, so I decided to paddle out the two miles to

find out. To my incredible amazement and delight, as I got closer, I saw a sight that I had only dreamed about: four orcas in the wild swimming toward me on my little paddleboard.

While I was a little scared, of course, I quickly realized that the orcas were very friendly and curious. They swam in circles near me and came to check me out. *Who is this two-legged creature standing on a narrow floating board?* I got to spend a blissful hour with these beautiful creatures. One of them swam directly under my board multiple times,

the top of its dorsal fin gliding just inches from the bottom of my board.

Fortunately, I captured the encounter on video, and my footage has been seen by millions of people all around the world. The feedback was incredibly positive because people loved seeing these glorious animals where they are supposed to be—in the wild.



Scan this on your smartphone to see video footage of "Paddle Boarders Close Encounter with Orcas."

The imposing six-foot high orca dorsal fin with Fashion Island in the background.



FACTS ABOUT ORCAS

- Orcas, also known as killer whales, are actually dolphins. They are the largest of the dolphins and perhaps the most powerful predator in the ocean.
- They are carnivores that feed on fish, squid, seabirds, and marine mammals such as seals, sea lions, and even whales. Fortunately for me, humans are not on their menu.
- In the wild, their life span is 50 to 80 years.
- They grow to be 23-32 feet long and weigh up to six tons.
- Like other dolphins, they travel in pods and spend their entire life with their families.
- Resident pods of orcas live in specific areas and transient pods travel upwards of 100 miles per day.
- Thanks to movies like *Blackfish*, we have seen the negative impact of placing Orcas (and all marine animals) in captivity.



I was very stoked when local photographer Bill Brown sent me these images he captured of this rare orca encounter







On the left: Bill Brown took this epic shot of a very curious orca that sent me to my knees. Above: this is the shot I took at the exact same moment As Bill. The orca went directly under my board, coming within inches of knocking me off!





This image was a winner in the 2015 Laguna Bluebelt photography competition which celebrates Laguna's Marine Protected Areas.



MOM AND BABY
GRAY WHALES



A TRULY MIRACULOUS DAY

Within several days of paddling with the orcas, my video of the encounter went completely viral. The global exposure started when I posted the video on my personal Facebook page. Within two hours, my video was shared almost 700 times. I knew I had something of interest, so I contacted ABC, NBC, and CBS in Los Angeles. All three networks ran my video live on the news that evening.

By the next morning, all three networks called me asking if every affiliate nationwide could run the story. And then the story went global, running on CNN, Yahoo, Huffington Post, NPR—all over the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia. My orca story was trending on Facebook for 48 straight hours. It was crazy!

Here's the coolest thing that happened, though: A couple of days after the story broke, I was sitting at my desk at my home, and in one morning, I was contacted by people from PETA, Save The Whales, Mission Blue (Sylvia Earle's organization), The Cove, and Blackfish. I had wanted to connect with all five of these top organizations, and each one contacted *me* and ran the story. Sitting at my desk, I cried. This was

the moment I realized that my once-in-a-lifetime chance encounter with the orcas was more than just a coincidence. This was the moment I knew I was meant to be some type of steward of the sea and a messenger for the ocean.

And then later, another miracle happened...

Six days after my orca sighting, my friend Justin went out paddling in the exact same spot and saw the exact same pod of orcas! Unfortunately, he didn't have a camera on him, so his encounter went undocumented. When he got back to shore, he called me immediately. As you can imagine, he was incredibly excited. The next morning, we both paddled out to the same spot, hoping the orcas were still hanging around. I knew the chances were slim—they travel up to 100 miles a day—but we had to give it a shot. Well, the orcas weren't there, but we saw something even more incredible.

Two miles off the coast of Laguna Beach, in the same place where the orcas had been, we saw lots of movement in the water. As we got closer, we noticed a female gray whale with her brand new baby calf. I can't say for sure, but from the size and look of the baby, I'm guessing it was only one to three days old. Normally, the mothers make it down to

Mexico to give birth, but apparently, this baby was eager to check out Laguna Beach and couldn't wait to make it that far south.

It was January 14, 2015, and the conditions could not have been more perfect. The ocean was glassy. The water was crystal clear. The lighting was pristine. And we had a 50-foot mom and her 12-foot little baby circling around us for over three hours.

The mother whale was teaching her baby how to swim. She had the baby on her back and would lift it up to take a breath. My friend and I sat there in awe, watching this miracle of new life and the connection between a mother and her child unfold. The craziest part was the mom would repeatedly bring her baby directly over to me. I experienced a total feeling of mutual trust and lost count of the number of times they circled around and swam gently past me. It was heavenly. It was surreal. And if not for the images in this book, I would have thought it was merely a dream.

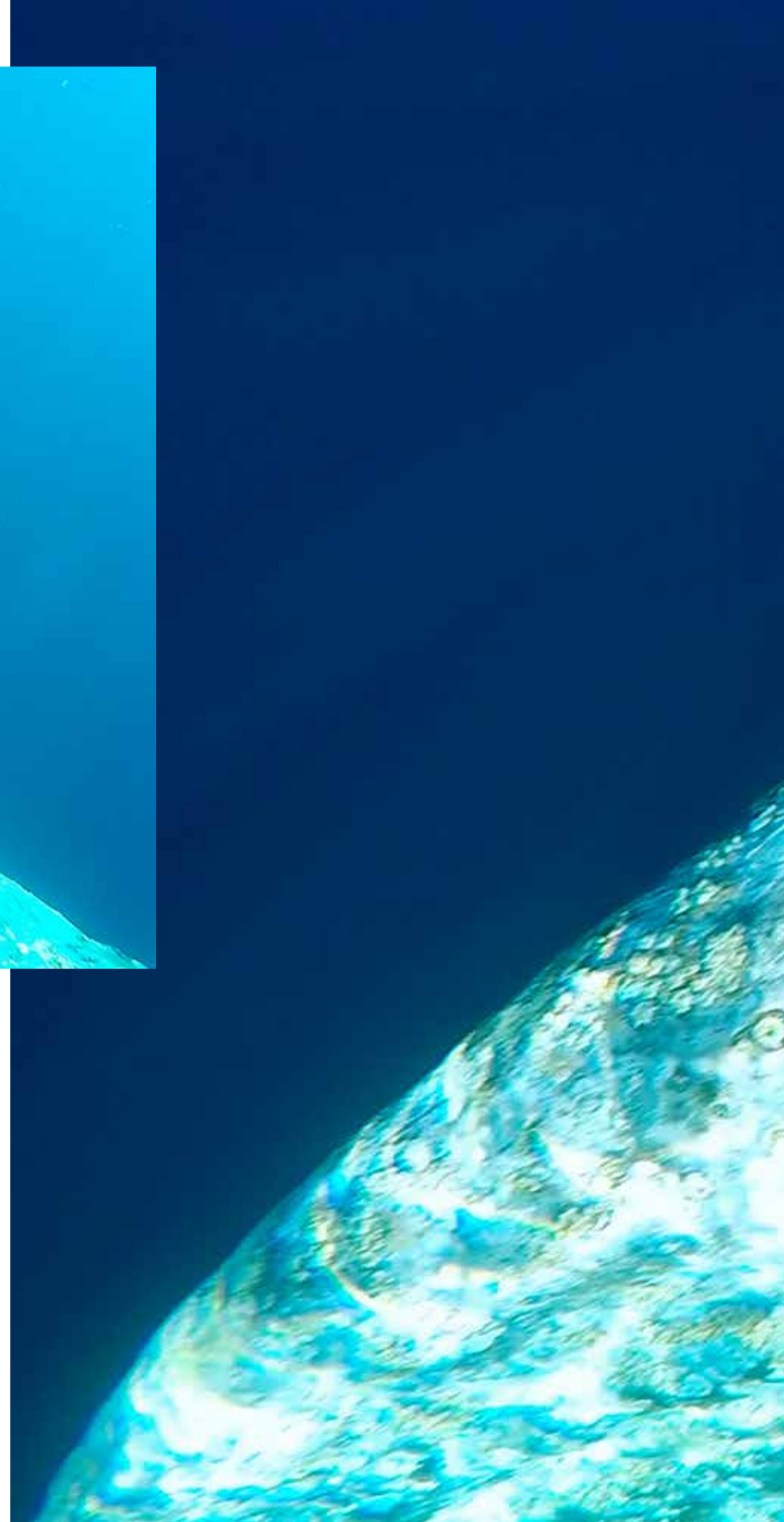
By the way, I took all these photos on my knees, holding my camera under the water—shooting blind.

I absolutely love this image. Here you see the tail of a large female gray whale right next to the fin of my board. The light for this moment was just perfect.



photo above: This is an incredibly rare look at a brand new baby whale. I think it looks like a little dinosaur!

photo right: This is the baby riding its mom's back coming right under my board.





The baby had scratches on its tail.







Here you can see the baby nursing.





The mother kept bringing her baby right over to me. Here you see them coming right under me and lifting my board off the water. It was incredible. This shot is an amazing look at the newborn's boney back.





















This shot won 1st Place in the 2016 Laguna Bluebelt photo contest.



VISION OF THE FUTURE

photo credit: Michelle Nicoloff





left: The branch office.

above: My dear friend Alora Ashlie captured this pod of common dolphins racing behind me.





A HOPEFUL VISION FOR THE FUTURE

What began as a hobby turned into an amazing connection with dolphins and whales. I eventually realized that connection was far from coincidence and that part of my life purpose was to become a steward for the ocean—to spearhead a movement.

As I stated in the opening of this book, I want people to love the ocean and the life living in it so much that, of course, we will do whatever needs to be done to protect both—just like we would protect our own child.

The vision is an ocean in which all animals are free to live as nature intended. The vision is to help restore, protect, and sustain the ocean, the life living in it, and all of humankind, now and for countless generations to follow.

This vision is now the mission of **Project O**, which I started as an attempt to bring this dream to life.

Project O is a movement rooted in love and awareness. We use photography, art, music, and film to educate our children, reach out to the public, and collaborate with existing organizations committed to the same future.

Thanks to important movies like *Blackfish* and *The Cove*, we have seen the dark side of what humans are doing to the ocean and the life in it. Our intention is to shed light on what is being done to create a healthy ocean and what we can all do to ensure the safety of the ocean and us as species.

Together, we can protect the ocean. Together, we can save the soul of our planet; our home.

Speaking to an angry mob of ocean loving 5th and 6th graders about ocean awareness

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been taking and sharing photos of dolphins and whales for several years now. And for years people have been encouraging me to create this book. Honestly, I resisted vehemently, not wanting to commingle what to me is a very spiritual experience with anything that involves business. But when I created Project O, I finally succumbed, as donating proceeds to the ocean cause became the win-win I needed to justify moving forward with this. So I will begin by thanking my online community who inspired me to create this book. I get a lot of satisfaction seeing all the joy you get from my photos and videos.

I would also like to thank Juliet Dillon Clark, Julia Stege, Laura Bush, Valerie Powers, Emanuela Dadarlat, Eva Xanthopoulos, and Jeremy Boston for all their creative input in the design of this book.

Thank you also to all my crazy friends at 'the cove' who see me cruising back and forth on my board like a mad man for hours at a time.

And last but not least, I of course want to thank the stars of this book, the dolphins and whales of Laguna Beach. Your presence in my life is a divine gift that I hope to one day fully comprehend and appreciate. Thank you for all the love you share with me. You have changed my life in profound ways and it is my honor to share these images with anyone who cares about you like I do. I can only hope for many more years of getting to paddle with you...



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