

Rescue Down Under

Seated in the rear of the boat, looking at the waves I said, “That really isn’t a lot between us and the whales, is it?” They all responded by laughing. We had just left the harbor on a 15 ft, partially inflatable boat on route to the mouth of the bay. Dr. Quincy Gibson, our captain, had the boat going full speed. At this rate it would take a little over an hour until we arrived at our destination. I had never seen a Humpback Whale in the wild before. Actually, I had never seen any whales in the wild. The closest I’d ever been to a whale prior to this was through 12 inches of glass at a Seaworld Adventure Park. The anticipation of this real life encounter was incredibly surreal.

Half way there, the hard crashing of the boat’s hull on the swells and the frigid spray of the salt water against my skin snapped me back into reality. The sun was low in the sky, just above the horizon, and it created a terrible glare on the water. We were almost there now. Quincy was at the helm and two associate researchers were on the bow. Ryan, the other intern and I, were in the back of the boat. Everyone was silent, slowly turning their heads to scan the water’s surface for any disturbance. All of a sudden, Quincy turned the boat toward the glare and the two researchers up front had started to prepare the camera. Ryan and I shot to our feet, straining to see what we were approaching. “There it is!” said Ryan in an overly excited tone. I was frantically scanning the water but all I could see were the rise and fall of the swells. Quincy slowed the boat and cut the engine, waiting for it to resurface. A few minutes had passed and I was afraid that I had missed it.

I will never forget that first time. I didn’t see it, I heard it. First, the sound of a spray, like water being spat from a hose. Then a deep grunting sound. I looked over and saw the slick black back of a massive animal. It was only about ten feet from the bow and was clearly interested in our presence. I was breathless. My eyes were transfixed on it as it cut through the water. Another spray. I saw a mist of water shoot about 12 feet in the air. All the other researchers on the boat turned their heads away, while Ryan and I looked on. It wasn’t long before we realized that we were downwind.

For your information, the breath of a whale kind of smells like a pungent mix of fish and black licorice. If that wasn’t gross enough, the subsequent sheen of moisture from the blowhole, which I equate with snot, covers your face in a thin layer. It was a disgusting experience but in hindsight it was one of the coolest moments out on the boat.

The whale circled the boat one more time then arched its back as if it was preparing to dive. At the last moment it stuck its huge tail flukes into the air, showing us a beautiful black and white pattern on its underside until it sank below the surface. Quincy restarted the boat and accelerated forward to search for the next pod. She looked back and asked me “Was that cool?” I replied, “No, that was freaking incredible.”

This adventure began when I applied for a Humpback Whale research internship in Hervey Bay, Australia. After being accepted to the internship and receiving a generous scholarship from the Timothy Smith family, one of my life dreams was about to come true. I was actually going to get the opportunity to fly to Australia for two weeks and assist in a multi-million dollar research project focused on marine mammal behavior. The months crept by until it was time to go.

After what seemed like an eternity, the night had finally arrived where I was going to start my adventure. Following my connection from Orlando to L.A., I boarded

the largest plane I had ever seen in my life to make a non-stop flight to Sydney, Australia. I had never left the United States before so I was nervous just as much as I was excited. The man who sat next to me on the plane and the first true Australian I had ever met was Dr. Harry Blatterer, a sociology professor from Macquarie University. He was truly one of the warmest people I have ever met. We spoke for hours about American and Australian culture on topics ranging from governmental systems to typically eaten foods. I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore when he told me he had never heard of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Actually, many Australians have never heard of eating PB and Js before and those who have heard of it, seem completely disgusted by the combination. In place of our old standard, many Australians put something called vegemite on their sandwiches. A thick brown pasty substance made of vegetables and yeast that has a strong taste of anchovies. When I arrived at the research house, it was sort of an initiation to taste some of it, not an experience I will likely repeat.

Fourteen hours, three movies, and two airplane meals later, I had arrived in Sydney. Fortunately, during the descent, it was daylight. The view of Sydney harbor which includes the famous bridge and opera house was a truly beautiful spectacle. If I ever return to Australia, Sydney will be the first place I explore. Harry said goodbye to me with a hug and extended an invitation to me to come visit him if I ever could.

There was only a half an hour until my next flight so I had to hurry. In total, I had two more flights to catch before I finally made it to Hervey Bay. Let me just say, airports in Australia are some of the hardest places to navigate. If it wasn't for the friendliness and assistance from the people there, I would have never made it. And, I'm not talking about help from the airline employees, I am talking about random Australian travelers who went out of their way. One man, who I still don't know his name, left his terminal to escort me to mine and spoke with security to expedite me through so I wouldn't miss my flight. Before I realized it, he was gone and I remember thinking that my first impression of Australian people was that they were incredibly genuine and welcoming. The rest of my experiences in Australia never changed that impression, but actually strengthened it.

My last flight was on a plane powered by two propellers that could only hold 20 people. I decided right before I boarded the plane that if I survived this flight, I would make the absolute best of my trip. The flight only lasted about half an hour but I was incredibly nervous, not just because if someone shifted their weight we could go plummeting to the earth, but because I had never actually spoken to the researchers I was about to meet. In honesty, I was starting to doubt they would even be there because I had always only spoken to them through an intermediary and wasn't sure if they knew when my flight was landing. I suddenly felt like a tiny fish in a huge pond.

The plane landed and we walked in from the runway. The airport terminal was tiny. There was only one gate and you could see baggage claim from it. I looked around hoping someone was holding a sign with my name on it. There was no sign but I guess the worried and lost look on my face was enough for Quincy to find me. I was so relieved to meet her and suddenly exhausted from all the traveling I had done. The drive back to the research house was awkward because we drove on the left side of the road; every time we made a right turn my heart skipped a beat.

Back at the house I got a real taste of the Australian lifestyle. First thing I noticed was that it was freezing! While it's summer for us in the Northern hemisphere, it is

winter for everyone in the Southern hemisphere. Unlike Americans, many Australians make do with modest comforts. There was no heating system in the house and all the appliances were undersized from an American perspective. For example, the clothes dryer was about the size of a mini fridge and the stove could only support one large pot at a time. This obviously saves energy and is more cost effective. The most interesting adaptation of the house was a dual flusher system, a button for half a flush and one for a whole flush which helps conserve water when you don't need as much. These differences I found to be universal everywhere I went, giving me the impression that Australia was a very environmentally efficient country.

Before we went to bed for the night, Quincy trained Ryan and I on their purpose for being here and a little bit on Humpback Whale behavior. The research being done in Hervey Bay, Australia and this internship is supported by the Pacific Whale Foundation. This is an organization based in Maui, Hawaii that was started in the 1960's. Its mission is to promote the appreciation, understanding, and protection of whales, dolphins, coral reefs, and the world's oceans. The research being done specifically in Australia is to determine the probability of annual visits from revisiting whales and to see the distribution and abundance of mother and calf pairs during their annual migration from Antarctica and back. Quincy ended her speech by showing us some pictures of what is typically seen out in the water. I tried to play it cool but I was too excited.

The alarm rang loudly at 6:00am Eastern Australian time, which if you're wondering is about 8:00pm Eastern U.S. time. I didn't sleep very well the night before but I was ready to go out on the boat. As I've said, the distance between the harbor and where we could spot the whales was about an hour ride. Although it was quite a distance we never left the bay. Hervey bay is located on the Eastern coast of Australia a few hours north of Sydney. It is known as a marine sanctuary for whales and is beneficial for the surrounding community because of the lucrative whale watching industry it supports.

After seeing that first whale, I was ready for more. We came up to our next pod and started getting ready to collect data. I was on the bow with the data sheet recording everything I could; this included the sea state, the wind speed/direction, the number of whales, the behaviors the whales were doing, and the frame numbers that Annie, one of the assistant researchers, was taking with the camera. The entire goal of being out on the water was to take pictures of the whale's tail flukes while they were in the air. This is because the markings on the underside of the flukes are as unique as our finger prints and documenting them with pictures is one of the only feasible ways of identifying them.

This particular pod we were with was not being very cooperative. They circled the boat, dived down, and slapped their pectoral fins, but they refused to extend their flukes into the air. Eventually they lost interest in our boat and started swimming away from us and into the swells. The sun was no longer on my face and water was splashing over the sides onto my legs. I had never shivered so hard in my life. Even with five layers over my chest and three layers over my legs, the water seeped through to my skin. It was nothing short of miserable. Finally, the whales took a deep angled dive and their fluke markings appeared. A couple quick shots of the camera later and we were off. I remember thinking, "What have I gotten myself into?"

As the day wore on, I dried off. We must have seen over 20 whales in small groups. These endangered animals are absolutely magnificent. Humpback Whales can grow to be up to 60 feet long and weigh over 45 tons. No matter how slowly they moved

and how gently they responded to us, it was very humbling to be in their presence. Many of the whales were very active. They lunged out of the water, rolled at the surface, grunted, blew bubbles, and slapped the water with such intensity that it would vibrate my rib cage. I was in awe of these animals. At one point, I was looking down quickly recording data when I heard an extremely loud splash and everyone gasp. The whale had just breached completely out of the water and I had missed it! Two days had passed while I was on the boat and I had not seen one breach. It was very disappointing.

On the third day out on the boat, I finally saw my first breach. The whale was about 50 feet away from the bow when it shot out from under the surface and its whole body cleared the water seeming to float in the air. Then it came crashing down into an enormous splash. You never truly understand the size of the whales while they're under water; the majority of the time you see some of their back or parts of their fins but, the entire animal is never really put into perspective until it is completely out of the water.

Our days out on the boat usually lasted from about 7:30 in the morning until sundown. Stabilizing yourself from the rough water and fighting off the cold were physically exhausting. We were given a short break for lunch but we generally spent all nine hours searching and following whale pods. To add to the adventure, there was no bathroom on the boat. Jumping in the water and going was not an option for two reasons: first because it was freezing cold and second because of the large population of tiger sharks. We all just had to make do. I was not fortunate enough to see any sharks while we were out on the boat but we got to see other awesome animals including, Loggerhead sea turtles, Australian Bottlenose Dolphins, and Dugongs.

One of my favorite parts of each day was returning to the harbor. The long drive back provided us a gorgeous view of the sun setting into the water. When we arrived back at the dock, we had to pack up the equipment, clean the boat, and rush home while we still had the energy to cook dinner and enter data.

A few days into the internship, Ryan and I had to trade off days we went onto the boat. The other intern had to stay home and help analyze data that was recorded from the previous day. Being involved with the factual aspect of the research was so exciting for me. I got to upload all the photos taken and choose the best fluke shots for each whale. Then I printed those shots out, labeled them, and categorized them in albums to be matched to other fluke photos later in the year. I also had to record the GPS coordinates from where we found each pod and write long descriptions on behavior and pod composition. It was very tedious work but also a good experience where I got to apply what I've learned about research methods from the University of Tampa.

The real joy on data entering days was being able to explore the surrounding town in our free time. I quickly learned that Australia was not as similar to the United States as I originally thought it would be. The size of Australia is comparable to the size of the United States but while the U. S. has a population of about 380 million people, Australia's population is about 25 million people. That is an incredible difference.

While I explored the town, I was able to experience other differences in our culture first hand. For example, the food in restaurants as well as the food in grocery stores seemed to be much healthier. Portion sizes were smaller, many items were all natural without added sugar, and snacks like granola bars and fruit leather seemed more popular than chips and cookies. As for the exchange rate, the American dollar, even now, is doing better than the Australian dollar; however, the price of living seems to be much

higher over there. I saw that many people rely on public transportation and many others choose to ride bicycles instead. I cannot speak for all of Australia but it seems like most Australians have a more realistic than idealistic lifestyle, which overall is better for the common good.

Toward the end of my internship, I was given one full day to do whatever I chose. I decided to visit a popular place nearby called Fraser Island. Touring this island would give me the opportunity to see more native Australian wildlife and learn a little bit more about Australian history. Fraser Island is known as the largest sand island in the world and is home to over 100 fresh water lakes. It is lined by 75 miles of beach and has dense sections of rainforest. Fraser Island was unlike anywhere I had ever been in my life. The day started with a ferry ride over to the island and a tour around some of the more popular sights. I had an incredible time and learned a lot in one day but I really struggled to follow along because of the language barrier. Now I know you're thinking "What language barrier? Australians speak English." This is true but between their thick accents and unfamiliar expressions, I was pretty lost. It was almost embarrassing because on numerous occasions the tour guide would tell a joke and everyone would laugh but I would have to ask the person next to me to repeat or explain it. By the time I understood the reference, I would be the only one laughing.

Regardless that I could barely understand our guide, I experienced things on the island that I will probably never get to again. One of the most famous lakes on Fraser Island is known as Lake Mackenzie. The air temperature was in the mid 60's and the water was even colder than that but I had the opportunity to swim in the lake and I was going to do it. The sand around the lake was bright white and pristine, and the water felt like velvet. Swimming out into the water and looking back toward the beach was an unimaginable sight.

No matter how much I enjoyed it, I soon got too cold and I started to walk back to the restrooms to change. I must have been about 30 yards away from the tour group when I saw something move in the corner of my eye. I took a few steps back, looked down a hikers trail and saw an adult dingo standing there apprehensively. I was so amazed. It looked at me a few seconds more, then turned around and ran off. I was so excited I ran back to the beach and spoke with two Australian women that I had met earlier on the tour. Sylvia and Elaine were both elderly grandmothers who liked to travel around Australia together. When they realized I was on the tour by myself they took me under their wing.

Sighting the dingo was big news because before the tour, the rangers gave us strict guidelines to never interact with the dingoes and they gave us specific instructions as to what we should do if ever stalked or attacked by one. They said that the number one rule was to never walk alone on the island because dingoes are known for being aggressive for food and occasionally attacking small children.

After I told the women about my encounter, I looked down at my watch and saw that it was almost time for us to join our guide back at the bus. We quickly gathered our things and started to walk back.

As we passed the trail where I saw the Dingo, I paused and stared down the path. Elaine came up to me and said in a thick Australian accent, "You want to go walk down there a bit don't you?" I said "I do, but it wouldn't be a very smart thing to do." Before I could finish Elaine said "Hey if we see it, it will take one look at me and go running the

other direction.” She was already two steps ahead of me before I could agree. I started walking along side her. We weren’t more than 20 feet down the trail when the dingo came back around the corner. We both froze in our tracks. At first I was awed, I was so excited to be seeing this magnificent animal in the wild. I expected it to turn right around and run away as it did before, but it didn’t. It started walking toward us and not with indifference. The dingo was looking directly at me as if studying my actions. I remember the rangers said never to run away, never to turn around, and to never provoke the animal, so I started to quietly walk backward. I glanced behind my shoulder to see Elaine and I saw that she had ran full speed toward Sylvia all the way at the end of the trail. In retrospect, I don’t think I have ever seen an 80 year old woman run so fast in my life.

Regardless, I started to back pedal faster to evade the dog but it was matching my speed. It wasn’t being aggressive just way too curious. At this point I could hear my pulse in my ears. I was absolutely terrified. The last thing I needed was to be mauled by a wild dingo. I took a few more steps back and I had hit into the trunk of a tree. At that moment, we were close to the mouth of the trail and another family had just walked by. This caught the attention of the dingo and it walked right past me. I had my camera in my hand and I was lucky enough to take a shot before it ran off. The rest of my day was fueled by my ensuing adrenaline rush. Encountering the dingo was not only one of the most amazing experiences I had in Australia but one of the most amazing experiences I’ve had in my lifetime.

The last day of my internship had arrived. Both Ryan and I were permitted onto the boat to have our last experience with the whales. The day started out slow. The water was very calm making the whales easier to spot; however, today there were no whales. No breaching, no fin slapping, no surface activity of any kind. After two hours of searching, we came upon one whale surfacing for a breath. It took one shallow dive into the dark water and never resurfaced again. Ryan, the researchers, and I were extremely frustrated. This was not a good way to end our experience.

We decided to stop for lunch which always consisted of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and an apple. The engine was off, leaving us to float lazily over the swells in the center of the bay. At this point we didn’t have too much to say to each other so we generally ate in silence. I noticed that Quincy had stopped eating and was staring intently into the air. My first reaction was to follow her line of sight, but all I saw was a clear blue patch of sky. I was going to ask her what she was looking at but then I heard a faint moan. I listened intently and heard the moan repeat itself. Immediately after, Quincy asked, “Hey Annie, do you hear singing?” Annie shook her head yes and the entire team looked alive with excitement.

It’s hard to explain how I felt at that moment. It was a complete perceptual shift from bitter disappointment to ultimate satisfaction. To hear a Humpback Whale sing in the wild was a dream of mine for as long as I’ve wanted to be a marine biologist. It was one of those unspoken, slightly random, far fetched dreams that we all carry.

The groaning was so faint, sometimes it would sharpen to a very high tone then sink to an inaudible low. Quincy explained that the reason why we hadn’t seen many whales all day was because the whales become much less active while they’re singing. There are many differing theories as to why Humpback Whales sing, but we know for sure it has a social purpose. Quincy saw me struggling to listen to the song and told me to put my ear on the hull of the boat. This is because the vibrations transferred directly from

the water would make it easier to hear. So I did exactly that, I got down on the floor and pressed my ear up against the metal. The only way to describe the sound of a Humpback Whale's song is to equivocate it to a cow drowning in mud. Now that may not sound too impressive but let me tell you, the song of a Humpback Whale is one of those things that can touch your soul.

The rest of the day seemed to fly by. We saw a few more pods and recorded some more data. On the ride back in, I felt like my adventure was over and that I was ready to fly home. I had experienced something that made my life more complete, I had learned things that I could never learn in a classroom, and I could leave with no regrets.