

PORT NOARLUNGA REEF

SEARCHING FOR IMAGES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

: BARRY SILKSTONE

AS A WILDLIFE WRITER, I'VE ALWAYS ENJOYED THE CHALLENGE OF PHOTOGRAPHICALLY ILLUSTRATING MY OWN ARTICLES AND BOOKS. THE LATEST SERIES, ON 'AUSTRALIAN MARINE LIFE', WAS A READY-MADE EXCUSE TO COMBINE MY TWO GREAT PASSIONS: THE OCEAN AND PHOTOGRAPHY. AN EXCURSION TO NORTHERN QUEENSLAND EARLIER IN THE YEAR PROVIDED A GOOD SELECTION OF TROPICAL IMAGES FOR MY EDITOR AND NOW I WAS BACK AT ONE OF MY FAVOURITE HAUNTS – SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S PORT NOARLUNGA REEF – TRYING TO CAPTURE SOME PICTURES OF TEMPERATE SPECIES TO COMPLETE THE ASSIGNMENT.

{hydroid and seasquirt}

I'd spent much of the morning drifting over the top of the reef between the shallow and deeper water, exploring the vastly different environments that each supported. Every time a wave caught me I was enveloped in a champagne swirl of bubbles that I shared with a small school of silvery sea sweep and a group of squid that were hunting, like me, between the two extremes. Ironically, they were my quarry and approaching them directly was futile. Any sudden movement and the little jet-propelled creatures would disappear in an instant to the relative safety of deeper water, well out of range. My only hope of getting the image I needed was to drift with them and hope they'd become more familiar with the strange creature invading their space.



The Port Noarlunga reef is a mere 45 minutes drive from the centre of Adelaide, South Australia's capital city, followed by a brief walk along the old wooden jetty to a dive platform. Because the reef has been a wildlife sanctuary for many years, the marine life is plentiful and largely indifferent to divers. The leeward side is around five to seven metres deep at high tide and rises abruptly from the sandy bottom to just break the surface at low tide. The area is extremely safe and commonly used by a range of divers including aquatics groups where children as young as eight are taught to snorkel. There's even an underwater trail with plaques attached to large concrete blocks explaining the dynamics of this remarkable ecosystem.

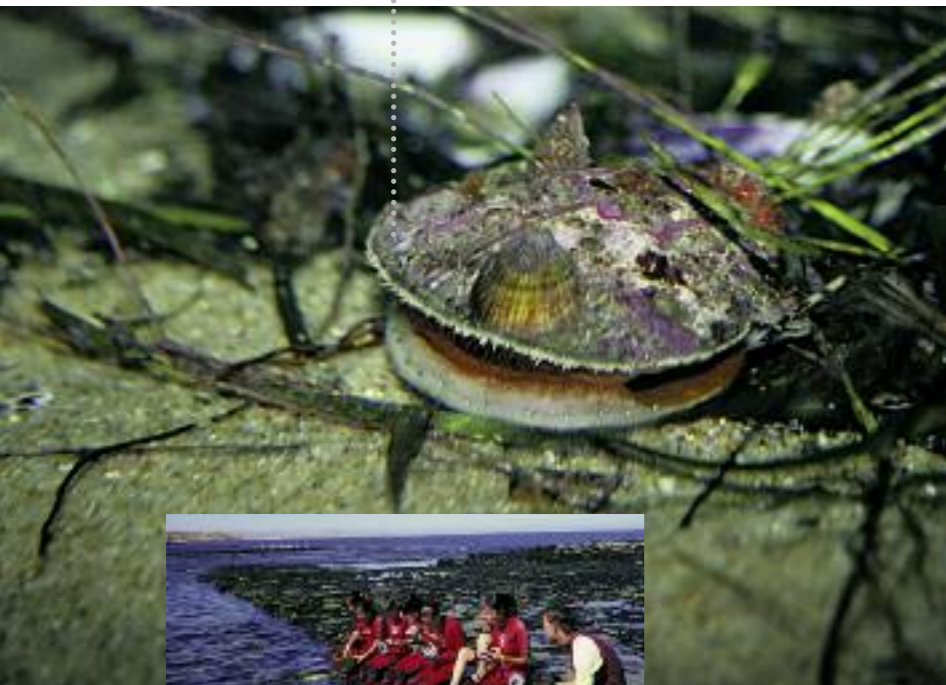
Apart from its accessibility and safety, the most notable feature of this marine park is the rich variety of ecological niches that occur in a relatively small area. There are seagrass meadows, broken sandy bottom, caves and crevices, as well as boulders and jetty piles covered with encrusting algae, colourful sponges and sea squirts.

A variety of fish move in and between the zones. Magpie perch feed on the surface of boulders releasing little puffs of ground rock and shell through their gills, reminiscent of parrotfish feeding on tropical reefs. A dozen different leatherjacket species swim



{small-scale bullseyes}

{ scallop }



{ snorkel class }

{ sealion }



{ wavy grubfish }



amongst the rock and weed beds, darting into caves when threatened or in the case of the more aggressive varieties, approaching head-on with their serrated head barbs erect. And each cave or recess has its resident group of bullseyes, hula fish and occasionally, a spectacular blue devil.

Schools of old wives, mullet and whiting congregate near the old wooden jetty piles, spiralling around the jungle of plants and animals clinging to the pitted surfaces. And if the gods of diving smile on you, there's an outside chance you may encounter one of the world's most bizarre fish, the Port Jackson shark – a small harmless species with a truly prehistoric appearance.

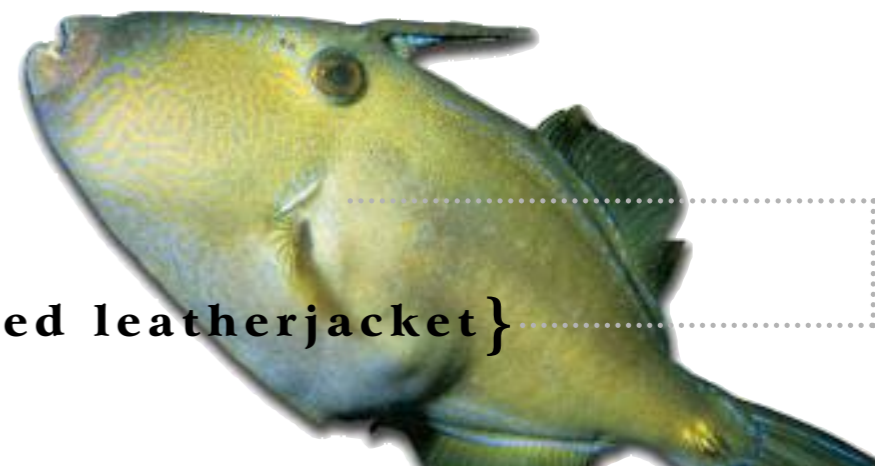
Clamber or swim over the reef and life changes; everything is a little larger here including the tidal surge. The almost vertical reef face drops steeply to around 12 metres and supports a thick forest of kelp where squadrons of powerful silver drummer patrol endlessly in search of food, while sinuous kelp fish glide between the algal fronds.

Apart from my tentacled playmates, a plethora of other invertebrate life makes the reef its home. Abalone wedge themselves into cracks in the limestone, a variety sea snails graze on the broad fronds of brown algae and chitons, mussels and limpets cling to the reef's upper surfaces weathering the tidal surges and periodic exposure to sun and air. Hydroids and feather duster worms wave their tentacles to catch particles of food, while brittle stars and sea cucumbers are often seen crawling along the lower reaches where the reef meets the sandy bottom.

For my purposes Port Noarlunga reef is a kind of one-stop shop, a place where over 200 temperate marine species, including over 50 kinds of fish, can be encountered and photographed in a remarkably safe, convenient and beautiful location.

However, Port Noarlunga's charms extend beyond the sub aquatic world. The little town at the base of the jetty has a range of restaurants, accommodation, antique shops, bakeries, and a dive centre. Noarlunga was also an ancient Aboriginal camp site where local people fished and hunted for

{ spiny tailed leatherjacket }



shellfish thousands of years before white settlement. Indeed, there's a wonderful 'Aboriginal dreaming story' that explains the reef's genesis. It tells of a spirit ancestor called Mullawirraburka who threw his spear into the sea; as it fell, the shaft broke into two uneven pieces forming a reef to attract fish and make sure that his people never went without food.

And the squid... to be honest, I never really got them lined up properly, and they eventually tired of my company and headed into deeper water.



{ zooanthids }



{ hermit crab }



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