



THE RIGHT SOUTHERN EXPERIENCE

: DAVID GLENNIE

> MY EVER-PATIENT WIFE SAYS I'M OBSESSED; HOWEVER, I FEEL THIS IS GROSSLY OVERSTATING THE SITUATION AND IT IS MERELY A CASE OF BEING KEEN TO LEARN. REGARDLESS OF MY MENTAL STATE I'VE BEEN ENJOYING THE PRIVILEGE OF SHARING THE WATERS OF BASS STRAIT WITH ONE OF OUR CREATOR'S FINEST – THE SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALE.

Each winter the southern right whales leave their sub Antarctic feeding grounds and migrate to the southern shores of the closest land masses, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and South America to mate, breed and socialise in the relatively warm water. We Victorian divers think our winter water is a bit chilly, but I guess if you're a whale from the Southern Ocean it may seem almost tropical.

The trigger for my recent obsession – sorry being keen to educate myself – was an invitation to work with a team documenting the southern right whale visiting our shores. Most importantly we worked under the conditions of a Department of Sustainability and Environment permit to capture still and video images of these whales. This permit turned us into image-capturing super heroes, with powers far above those of mere mortals. Heavy penalties exist to protect all whales and dolphins from interference and harassment from people and vessels throughout Australian waters. These regulations are in the best interests of both the water

user and the whale and so please stay more than 100 metres from the animal in your boat or jet ski and 50 metres for all swimmers, snorkelers and divers.

This new-found subject took me from Cape Liptrap in eastern Victoria to Port Campbell in the west, observing from a

small fleet of boats and windswept cliff tops. Evenings were spent reading books, drooling over the stunning southern right whale images from Steven Wong and Takako Uno in their book *An Ocean Odyssey* and searching the internet. More great images from marinethemes.com, underwater videos

Left & top: Bass Strait goes off as a humpback and southern right compete in a simultaneous airshow off Cape Liptrap.

Right: Inquisitive and playful, this southern right whale could not resist swimming up to investigate the strange looking freedivers.





shot in South Africa, whale watching tours in Brazil and Argentina all filled the computer screen. Lengthy phone calls to whale watchers, researchers, fishermen and charter boat operators further fed my quest for knowledge and Megan's obsession theory.

THE EASTERN SIDE OF THE CAPE IS PROTECTED FROM THE POUNDING WAVE ACTION AND THE CALM AND SHELTERED WATERS MAKE FOR AN IDEAL SOUTHERN RIGHT RESTING PLACE.

Our first successful recording took place on the Mornington Peninsula, around an hour and half drive south of Melbourne. Cape Schanck juts boldly into Bass Strait, its basalt cliffs supporting a

lighthouse and repelling the constant ocean swells that originate deep in the Southern Ocean. The eastern side of the Cape is protected from the pounding wave action and the calm and sheltered waters make for an ideal southern right resting place. Nestled in front of a quiet sandy beach was a 10 metre long adolescent enjoying a break from a busy migration schedule and socialising before the long swim south for the summer.

A whale of this size was most likely born on the Victorian coast around this time last year. After birth its doting mum guided her baby back to the Southern Ocean for the summer feeding season before escorting the now adolescent back to our local waters to escape the harsh winter. Having returned to the safe and familiar waters, Mum

Left to right: The calm, protected waters of Bushrangers Bay must be a beautiful place for a whale to frolic.

The rugged Cape Schanck juts out into Bass Strait, giving protection to Bushrangers Bay from the constant swell.

The world famous Twelve Apostles seen from the seaward side as our boat cruises past.



considers her work done after twelve months of rearing and educating in migratory routes and the adolescent leaves its mothers side to begin a life of its own.

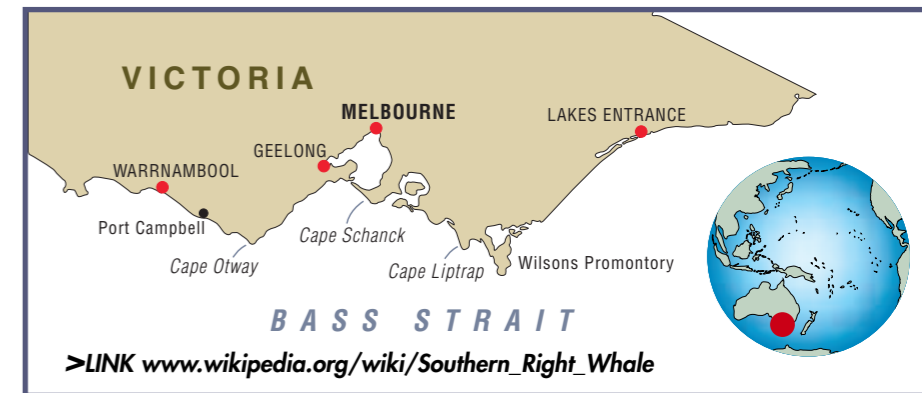
If our whale is a female, when she's mature she'll then give birth to her own calf in the same area where she was born – perhaps even the exact same bay. If it is a female, does this mean that she was born in Bushrangers Bay at this time last year and has returned as part of future regular migration?

If our whale is male, he lives more like a guy, always returning to the same coastal area but cruising around looking for a female to mate with. In a situation strangely parallel to his human cousins, our man will have to compete with other males for the affection of his choice, and find that not all of the girls will be receptive to his advances. This sounds like most bars and nightclubs on a Saturday night! Unlike humans that I know, the female may mate with several males with only the most dominant sperm getting through to fertilise the next generation. The male southern right actually has the largest testes of any living animal and produces enough sperm to flush out that of his rivals if they've already mated with his beauty, leaving only his own seed. The effect of the low winter water temperature made me feel somewhat self conscious when alongside the biggest balls in the natural world.

Although not able to ascertain the gender of our whale, the interaction was amazing. Its behaviour was more like that of a golden retriever, albeit with a bigger tail to wag, than that of one of the world's great migratory whales. On our arrival our whale swam

directly towards the boat, passing within a metre or two. Between visits to the boat, a big black head with white callosities patterns would spy hop,

complete with lighthouse and Wilsons Promontory's mountain peaks as a backdrop to the east. The subject on this occasion was an adult whale, 13 or 14



craning skywards to check the visitors. When in the water our whale followed us around the bay and when outside the range of visibility it would about face and return after a few seconds, seemingly seeking our company. Whilst we lay on the surface our oversized puppy would approach us in a straight line until a couple of metres away and then bank away to the left or right showing us its full length from nose to tail. It may be obsession again, but it felt as though there was a pause in motion when our eyes met as it passed. In between surface visits to check out the clumsy freediver our new best friend would lie on the sandy bottom, some eight metres below, rubbing its stomach on the sand and allowing loose kelp to drape over its face and pectoral fins. Is this what whales do instead of attending a day spa?

Another special day on the water saw us at Cape Liptrap, some 200 kilometres southeast of metropolitan Melbourne. A beautiful area with golden sandy beaches, towering cliffs

metres in length. Our experience this time was completely different to Cape Schanck as the whale was not lounging in a protected bay but making steady progress in an easterly direction, a whale on a mission. Carefully observing the whale's behaviour meant there'd be no in-water interaction today so we didn't stress the traveller or interfere with its natural behaviour.

Imagine our amazement when less than 500 metres from our southern right, a humpback breached six times. Like kids in a lolly shop we didn't know which way to look or point our cameras, left for the humpback or right for the southern right whale. The humpbacks were swimming considerably quicker than their callosities-faced cousin and soon had moved out of the area. With the young humpback out of the way, our southern right put on a heavyweight aerobatics show of its own. Propelling around 80 tonnes of whale into the air before an engulfing splash of white water has to be one of the most spectacular sights on the ocean.





A visit to the Cape Schanck lighthouse delivers a history lesson and an unsurpassed vantage point.

The future of the southern right whale is unfortunately not guaranteed as their critically endangered conservation status implies. Each year it is the same individual whales that visit southeast Australia in their attempt to continue their branch of the species. Current scientific studies suggest the total number of whales visiting is likely to be less than 50 individual animals. A sobering thought that so few southern right whales visit the large area encompassing eastern Victoria, southern New South Wales and Tasmania. Of this small population, only between 10 and 15 are breeding females and it is alarming to do the math on only 10 to 15 females giving birth every three years to bring a yearly average of only three or four juveniles into the group. Southern right whales visit other areas of Australia and the southern hemisphere, however there may be no sexual interaction between the individuals of Victoria with those of South Australia or Western Australia let alone from other countries. The boffins call this a genetically isolated

population but to us it means the last 40 to 50 visitors of this magnificent creature to our waters.

Each southern right whale has a unique pattern of callosities on its head – look carefully at the photos. Researchers use the white growths to identify individual whales. The images we gathered will be crossmatched with the existing data base to gain a greater insight into the travelling patterns of *eubalaena australis* and assist with education and conservation.

Megan may be correct and there has been excessive enthusiasm about these iconic whales, but we both hope that our children Jacob, Casey, Heather and Liam get the same opportunity as I've had.

Author's Note: My DSE Permit reference number is 10004170

